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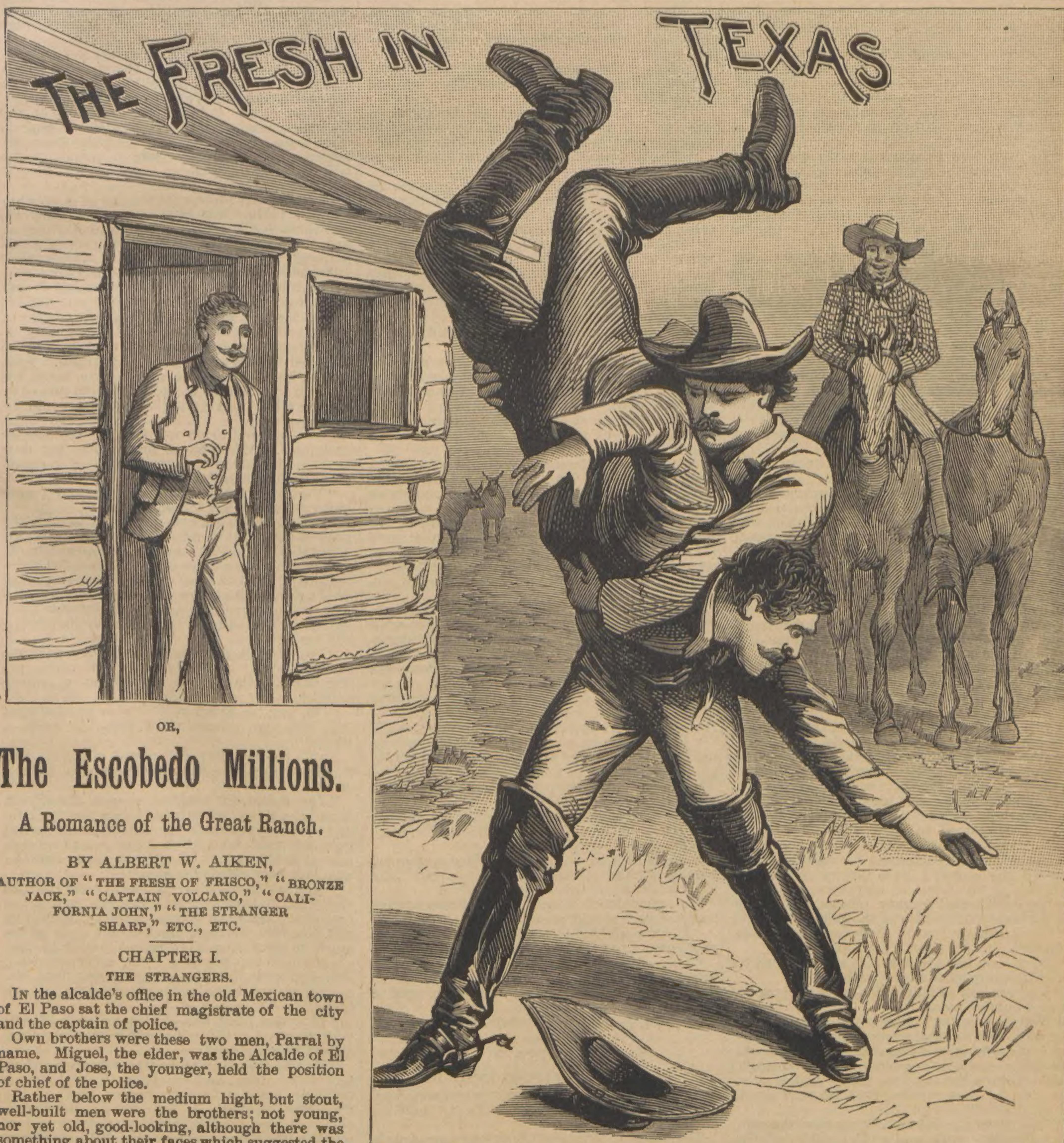
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OR, The Escobedo Millions.

A Romance of the Great Ranch.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "BRONZE JACK," "CAPTAIN VOLCANO," "CALIFORNIA JOHN," "THE STRANGER SHARP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGERS.

In the alcalde's office in the old Mexican town of El Paso sat the chief magistrate of the city and the captain of police.

Own brothers were these two men, Parral by name. Miguel, the elder, was the Alcalde of El Paso, and Jose, the younger, held the position of chief of the police.

Rather below the medium height, but stout, well-built men were the brothers; not young, nor yet old, good-looking, although there was something about their faces which suggested the bulldog.

They were dressed richly, as befitted men who

THE FRESH LIFTED HIS ASSAILANT FAIRLY FROM THE GROUND AND, TURNING HIM IN THE AIR, THREW HIM OVER HIS SHOULDER.

held important positions, and at the time we introduce them to the reader's notice had just begun an important conversation, the captain of police having just entered the office.

"Well, how goes it?" quoth the alcalde.

"Badly," responded the other.

"How much have you succeeded in getting?"

"A little short of a hundred ounces."

"Ah, *caramba!* what is that when a man needs a thousand?" exclaimed the alcalde.

"Did you call upon our friends, the gamblers?"

"Yes, upon every man."

"And they were not willing to contribute, eh?"

"Only a trifle."

"Did you not tell them that I was sorely pressed for money, and hint that if they did not help me in my need, I might be obliged in the interest of morality to put a stop to their games?"

"Oh, yes, I put it to them as strongly as I could."

"And they were not inclined to come down?"

"No, they all declared they had come down pretty well already."

The alcalde shrugged his shoulders like a Frenchman.

"Well, well, there is some truth in that," he admitted. "But still the scamps ought not to grumble, for if I did not wink at their open gambling dens they would not be able to make any money at all."

"Now, Doc Moses is rich—his faro-bank makes a fortune every week. Did you see him and explain how I was situated?"

"Yes, Moses contributed fifty ounces, all he said he could spare," the captain of police answered.

"Moses declares that his place has made very little money during the past month, and when I attempted to put the screws on, he replied, promptly, that if you wanted to kill the goose who was laying the golden eggs, you were perfectly welcome to do it, as far as he was concerned."

"He said: first I pay a tax to the town for a license to carry on my business, and then I pay as much more to you and the alcalde; that is on the quiet, but if I am going to be struck for a stake every time either you or your brother run short of cash, why I might as well give up, for I cannot stand the press."

"True, very true, the man is right," the alcalde remarked. "A free horse must not be ridden to death."

"How long have you got before this demand of the governor must be met?" the chief of police asked.

"Oh, I have another month, but a thousand ounces is no small sum, and so I have begun to get it together. That is the price of my position here, you understand. A thousand ounces a year is what Pedro Cosala, Governor of Chihuahua, considers the office of Alcalde of El Paso to be worth, and if I do not pay the money I will very quickly be removed."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly, and it is richly worth that sum."

"Certainly, but I have had bad luck, and that is why I am short of money. The infernal cards have run against me constantly for the last month, and if my luck does not change soon, I shall have to stop playing."

"I can sympathize with you, for my luck has been atrocious too for the last few days," the captain of police remarked with a melancholy shake of the head.

"Yes, it is strange how luck will run sometimes. By the way did you call upon the Jew pawnbroker Hadad Solomons?"

"Oh, yes; he was one of the first men I visited, because I thought he would be good for a couple of hundred ounces at the least."

The alcalde shook his head.

"It is about as easy to get blood from a stone as to get money from a Jew," he declared.

"Well, it was so in this case. He declared he had recently suffered such severe losses through the rascality of some of his agents, who had absconded with his funds that he had hardly a cent to bless himself with, and had been really obliged to borrow money so as to be able to get along."

"The old liar!" exclaimed the alcalde, "and after all the money I have thrown in his way too!"

"He contributed twenty ounces, but it was like parting with his heart's blood."

"I do not doubt that in the least," the alcalde remarked.

"To a man like the Jew it is about as bad to part with his gold as with his blood."

"Yes, yes, the old Jew fairly groaned as he counted out the ounces."

"Well, let me see," observed the alcalde, reflectively. "The money must be raised in some way. If my luck was running all right I could take this sum which you have raised and easily swell it into a thousand at the card-table—ay, into two for that matter, but I do not dare to risk it."

"True, it is a great risk," remarked the captain of police with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Now if that devil of an Escobedo was only

here the money might be raised," the alcalde said.

"Yes, he was a valuable fellow. With his band of cut-throats he could be depended upon in a pinch like this."

"You are right, he could always be depended upon to gather wealth. It was an evil day for us when this American—this Jackson Blake, who calls himself the Fresh of Frisco, made his appearance in this section!" the alcalde declared.

"Let me see; that was nearly two years ago."

"Yes, and inside of twelve months of the time he came here, he succeeded in breaking up Escobedo's band; if you remember, they called themselves the Red Riders of Rayon."

The chief of police nodded.

"And Manuel Escobedo was fairly driven out of the country by him."

"Yes, if my recollection serves me right, he and his sister departed together; but where did they go?"

"To the island of Cuba, where Escobedo had rich kindred. He called upon me after this rascal of a Fresh got his clamps upon him and said that he had come to the determination to seek for fortune elsewhere."

"His band was destroyed and this demon of a North American had sworn to kill him if he ever encountered him on Texan soil, and so, under the circumstances, he had determined to go to Cuba, but he swore to me that if fortune ever smiled upon him he would return and make this Jackson Blake pay dearly for his triumph."

"I do not doubt that he will keep his word," the chief observed.

"Manuel Escobedo was a fine, daring fellow, and until he had the ill-luck to meet this North American, carried matters with a high hand in this region."

"Many is the silver ounce that you and I have fingered, Miguel, through Manuel Escobedo and his Red Riders of Rayon."

"True, and I wish the band was in existence now to help me out of my present scrape, for where to get this thousand ounces I know not."

"The governor will not be apt to grant more time?"

"Oh, no, he cannot, for he has to pay his assessment to the party at the capital through whose favor he holds the governorship. His tax is ten thousand ounces, I believe."

"It is a large sum; still, when you consider what pretty pickings the governor of such a province as Chihuahua has, the position is richly worth it."

At this moment the door opened and two strangers made their appearance.

They were well-dressed and were evidently foreigners.

One was a tall, well-formed man with long jet-black hair which curled in ringlets almost down to his shoulders; all the lower part of his face was covered with a short, crispy-curling beard, of the same ebon hue as his hair, and his complexion was almost as dark as that of a negro.

As far as could be seen, for the beard covered fully one-half of his face, his features were strongly marked, and indicated that he was a man of great determination.

The second stranger strongly resembled the first, only he was much younger, hardly more than a boy, but possessed a well-built figure, which gave promise of unusual strength.

His face was smooth, no trace of a beard, excepting a dark line upon his upper lip.

And upon his face too, like his companion's, were written the signs which, to an experienced eye, told of dauntless courage and firm determination.

The complexion also of the young man was extremely dark, but not the reddish, copper color of the half-breed, and from the contour of their faces it was plain that neither one of the two had any Indian blood in his veins.

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Don Miguel Parral, Alcalde of El Paso?" the elder stranger asked, bowing to the official.

"That is my name, sir; what can I do for you?" responded the alcalde.

"We are strangers here in El Paso, having but lately arrived from the island of Cuba," explained the tall gentleman.

The alcalde and the chief of police exchanged glances at the mention of the "ever-faithful isle," as the Spaniards delight to call it.

The coincidence seemed odd to them, as they had just been speaking of Cuba.

"I am delighted to welcome you to El Paso, gentlemen," the alcalde said.

"Have the kindness to be seated, and make yourselves perfectly at home. I have many acquaintances in Cuba and am always pleased to see any one from there."

The strangers seated themselves.

CHAPTER II.

THE FATE OF MANUEL ESCOBEDO.

"PERMIT me to introduce my brother, Jose, captain of police here in El Paso," said the alcalde.

The strangers expressed their pleasure at making the acquaintance of so important a personage, and the elder said:

"Since introductions are in order, permit me to make known to you who we are."

The others bowed.

"My name is Fernando Gomes, and this gentleman is called Sebastian Esparto, and though we are Cuban born and bred, yet we do not feel as if we were entirely strangers to this section, for our mothers originally came from here."

"Ah, is that so?" the alcalde remarked.

"Yes, they were of the Escobedo line, cousins to Estevan Escobedo, the once famous cattle king of the Rio Grande."

"Yes, yes, both my brother and myself were well-acquainted with that gentleman," the alcalde remarked.

"And you were also on familiar terms with a relative of the old cattle king who was at one time an inmate of his household, Manuel Escobedo," said Fernando Gomes.

This was not entirely unexpected, for when the stranger had explained that he and his companion claimed kindred with the Escobedos the thought had come to both the brothers that there was a probability they were about to hear news of the man whose absence they had been regretting when the strangers entered.

"Oh, yes, my brother and I were just speaking of him," the alcalde remarked. "He was a man whom we thought a deal of, and we were wishing he was back again with us here in El Paso."

"Then you are not aware of Manuel Escobedo's fate?" said the Cuban in a tone of surprise, and then he added: "But that is not strange though for the island of Cuba is a long way from El Paso, and I suppose it is not a common thing for you to hear news of what transpires in the island here."

"No, it is but seldom that we are so favored," the alcalde replied. "But the way in which you speak of Manuel Escobedo alarms me. Is it possible that aught amiss has come to him?"

"Here is the full account from one of the Havana newspapers," responded Fernando Gomes, taking a newspaper clipping from his pocket-book and giving it into the hands of the official.

The alcalde read it aloud.

It was a brief account of the loss of a trading schooner plying between Havana and the ports on the south side of the island. In a storm it had been forced ashore and all on board had perished, with the exception of a single sailor who had escaped to tell the tale of the disaster.

The schooner carried two passengers in addition to her crew, a Mexican gentleman and his sister, Manuel and Isabel Escobedo, both of whom had met a watery grave.

"This is indeed bad news!" the captain of police observed, with a grave shake of the head. "Escobedo was a man who would have made his mark in the world if he had lived, I am sure of it. He was a bold and daring fellow and could be depended upon."

"That is true! every word of it!" the alcalde exclaimed. "He was a man after my own heart, and many is the good stake of business we have done together."

"Yes, so he informed me; Manuel and I were quite intimate," the Cuban remarked.

The speech was simple enough but it made the Parrals exchange wondering glances.

"Manuel confided to me the reason which obliged him to leave this section," Fernando Gomes continued. "And from the hour that he quitted El Paso he looked forward to the time when he should return and take a bloody vengeance upon the man who had been instrumental in driving him away."

"Did he tell you the name of the man?" the alcalde asked, evidently possessed with the idea that the Cuban was possibly exaggerating a little.

"Oh, yes, the Fresh of Frisco as he calls himself, the man whose right name is Jackson Blake."

Again the brothers exchanged glances. The Cuban evidently knew what he was talking about.

"The desire for vengeance upon this North American desperado was an overpowering one, and the sole purpose of his exile from his native land was that he might acquire wealth enough to enable him to come back and crush the man who had triumphed over him."

"Yes, that was like Escobedo," the alcalde observed. "He was a true Mexican, and never forgot or forgave an injury. It is a pity that he met his fate so soon, for I would have given much to have seen him return and take vengeance upon this boasting Fresh of Frisco, who, although undoubtedly a man who can fight like a demon, yet talks as carelessly as a schoolboy."

"If he had lived he would have had a bloody vengeance upon this interloper!" the Cuban declared, impressively.

"He had friends in Cuba who asked him when he arrived there, and his sister, Isabel, made a brilliant match, having wedded one of the wealthiest planters on the island. He was an old man and only survived the union a few months, and when he died all of his vast estate came to his widow, and as Isabel was devoted to her brother, thanks to this fortune, he had

The Fresh in Texas.

money enough to enable him to carry out his plans of vengeance."

"What a misfortune that death should have cut him off thus untimely!" the alcalde cried.

"Yes, but this heritage of vengeance has descended to my cousin Sebastian here and myself," the Cuban explained. "We are the heirs of Manuel and Isabel Escobedo."

"Manuel, before he set out on this fatal trip had a presentiment that some accident might happen to him and so he confided all his plans to us, together with some of the secrets of his life here in El Paso, and we agreed that if anything occurred to him we would come to Mexico and execute his vengeance."

"Manuel did perish, as he feared, and we are here to keep our pledge. We have plenty of money and think we have the courage and ability to pull down and crush this boaster who calls himself the Fresh of 'Frisco."

And the fierce light which shone in the eyes of both the Cubans convinced the brothers that the strangers would do all in their power to fulfill the task which they had taken upon themselves.

"You say that Manuel Escobedo confided his secrets to you?" the alcalde remarked, with the intention of ascertaining how much of the Mexican's past life the stranger really knew.

"Yes, all that appertained to this quarrel or could be of use to us in prosecuting it," the Cuban replied, without a moment's hesitation.

"And knowing these secrets is why we came to you, for we felt sure we could count on your assistance, for we could afford to make it worth your while to act with us as you formerly acted with Manuel Escobedo in this Red Riders of Rayon business."

"I do not exactly understand," said the alcalde, endeavoring to assume an innocent air.

"Oh, yes you do, alcalde," the Cuban replied, with a smile. "You understand well enough, and so does your brother here, the chief of police."

"Come, it is no use for us to beat about the bush. Let us come to an understanding at once. We need your aid in this fight, and are prepared to make it worth your while to go into it. You shared the plunder gained by the Red Riders of Rayon and winked at their deeds."

"Now, in order to fight this Fresh of 'Frisco, we are going to revive the Red Rider band, and we want you two for confederates as before, and in order to show you that we are in earnest, here is a draft for five hundred ounces on Bunker Weinholdt, which I will indorse to your order."

And taking the draft from his pocket-book he wrote the indorsement upon it.

"In another month there will be as much more for you," the Cuban continued. "And if we strike any big game after the band is organized, we will not forget your share."

"My cousin and I understand this sort of work, for we have both led insurgent bands in Cuba."

The alcalde took the draft with an eagerness which he did not attempt to conceal.

"It is a pleasure to do business with gentlemen like yourselves," he declared.

"All I require is that you manage the matter so that I will not be implicated, no matter what happens, and you can rely upon both Jose and myself doing all in our power to aid you."

"It is a bargain, and you can depend upon our discretion."

"And now, how stands matters? Has this Fresh married the heiress, Margaret yet?"

"No, although it has been rumored for some time that Miss Escobedo—who inherited all the old cattle king's property, you know—"

The others nodded.

"It has been rumored for over a year that she and this Blake would marry, but they have not."

"Nor will they, now that we have come!" exclaimed the younger Cuban, in a voice full of menace.

"How does El Paso and the Fresh get along? There was a time when he was hunted out of the town in a lively manner?" Gomes asked.

"Oh, that is all blown over now," the alcalde replied. "Neither my brother nor myself thought that it was wise to keep up the quarrel."

"When you come down to the truth of the matter, the American acted in self-defense. We jumped on him and he whipped us, and after the Red Rider band was dispersed and Manuel Escobedo departed, we concluded that it would be foolish for us to attempt to keep up the quarrel so we sent him word that we bore no malice."

"And he comes and goes in El Paso freely?" Fernando Gomes asked.

"Oh, yes, as freely as any one, and as he is a great gambler, he spends considerable of his time in the town."

"So much the better, for then we will be able to get at him," Gomes observed.

"Have you ever met the man?" the chief of police asked.

"Are we not strangers just arrived in El Paso?" the Cuban replied.

"Well, then, take my advice and do not hold him too cheaply. He is as dangerous a man as ever struck the banks of the Rio Grande!" Jose Parral observed, earnestly.

"We will not underrate him and will not engage in a contest until all the advantage is on our side," Gomes declared. "We stop at the Hotel Mexico and shall be glad to have you call when convenient."

"I shall be charmed," the alcalde replied, and then the Cubans withdrew.

CHAPTER III.

AN HONEST CONFESSION.

ALONG the trail leading from the Rio Grande to the Escobedo Plantation rode two men, mounted on most excellent steeds, not the undersized small-limbed Texan mustangs, but two horses whose size and appearance, to the practiced eye, would have denoted that they came of Kentucky racing blood—the blue-grass strain, famous for its four-milers, its bottom and endurance.

One horseman was young, the other a man well in years.

The young man was a little above the medium size, with a figure so well developed that he might have passed as a model for one of the ancient sculptors who desired to form a figure, Apollo and Hercules combined.

The frank, open face, the keen, gray-blue eyes, and the yellow hair, curling in little crispy ringlets close to his well-shaped head, together with a certain peculiar careless air, so difficult to describe, would reveal to any one who had ever encountered the man, or heard a good description of him, that this was the famous Fresh of 'Frisco, who was really better known by that title than by his own rightful appellation of Jackson Blake.

It was plain from the way that the Fresh was dressed that the world had gone well with him lately.

His suit of buckskin—not cut after the Indian fashion, in hunting-shirt and leggings, but as coat and pantaloons—was new, and showed no signs of hard wear.

The long riding-boots, coming to his knees, were of untanned leather, after the Mexican fashion, and fitted him like a glove.

The elaborately-frilled shirt, upon which Jackson Blake prided himself, and which he was never seen without, unless he had had an unusual run of bad luck and was clean down to the "bed-rock," so as to be absolutely unable to afford the luxury, was composed of the finest of linen, and amid the frills blazed three costly diamond studs.

His broad-brimmed, soft felt hat, cream-white in color, was as handsome a head-covering as a man would care to wear, and, to take him all in all, the Fresh of 'Frisco was in splendid feather.

The man who rode by the Fresh's side was a most decided contrast to him, being well on in years, rather undersized, though extremely stockily built: had a thin face, the chin covered with a scrubby beard, but his small, gray eyes were wonderfully keen.

He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, and a good judge of men, as they are found on the frontiers of civilization, would have at once pronounced him to be an old mountain man.

This was Old California Joe, a man who has won a name which will never die while the history of the wild life of the West is told.

The Fresh had a ranch a few miles down the Rio Grande, and was on his way to pay a visit to the ranch of Margaret Escobedo, the heiress of the old cattle king, Estevan Escobedo, and reputed to be the richest landholder in that part of Texas.

The two had ridden along at a brisk pace, and now had pulled their horses into a walk, in order to breathe the animals, and thus were afforded an opportunity for conversation.

"We are bound for the Escobedo Ranch, I reckon," said California Joe.

"Yes, that is our objective point."

"But, you said when we started out that you didn't know 'zactly where you was going."

"No more did I: the fact is, I want to get some young cows, and I had not determined whether to try the Escobedo Ranch, or the one above, for them."

"Sho! is that so? Wa-al, now I reckoned that you were going to call on the heiress of Escobedo," the old man remarked, with a knowing smile.

The Fresh laughed.

"Well, it is likely that I shall see Miss Margaret before I quit the ranch," he replied.

"Yes, I reckon it wouldn't be perlite to go to the ranch without calling on the mistress."

"That is true, although all my business can be transacted with the superintendent."

"You mean Houma?"

"Yes, he is the man."

"Say! w'ot do you think of that cuss, anyway?" asked the old mountain man, abruptly.

"Well, I don't exactly know; I cannot say that I have made much of a study of him," the Fresh replied, carelessly.

"I don't like the feller for a cent!" California Joe declared. "I think he is a rascal! And jest see w'ot an outlandish handle the galoot has got. Lycurgus Houma! Thar's a healthy name for a Christian to carry 'round!"

"Oh, come now, California, you are too

severe!" exclaimed the Fresh, laughing at the old man's conceit. "The man is not to blame for his name; he cannot help that, you know; besides, the name is all right, although it is rather an odd one. Lycurgus was one of the wisest of the Greeks, a man whom it was safe to tie to every time, to use our modern vernacular; and it strikes me that Houma is a French Creole name. In fact, I believe the man claims to come from Louisiana."

"I reckon he does, but I don't take any stock in him, no matter whar he comes from!" the old mountain-man declared.

"Well, I can't say that I admire the man myself."

"I think he is a rascal!" California Joe declared.

"Ob, come now, ain't you a little harsh in your judgment? Remember this Houma was one of the old cattle king's trusted men, and when he died, and the estate came under Judge Bullifant's management, before Margaret Escobedo arrived from her home in the East, the judge fully trusted Houma, and the old judge knew human nature like a book and was not likely to make a mistake."

"That's so, but you ain't calculating that thar's a heap of difference between doing business with a man like old Estevan Escobedo, who was as keen as a rogue when it came to a trade, or with Judge Bullifant, another keen customer, and with a gal like Miss Margaret, who ain't used to figures and is not on the watch for rascals."

"Oh, yes, it would make a heap of difference, of course. A man who was disposed to play the rascal would be much more apt to try the game when he only had an unsuspecting woman to deal with than if he was acting with men," the sport declared.

"That is my say-so to a hair!" California Joe declared.

"Then thar's that nephew of Judge Bullifant's who has succeeded to his business, Dick Bullifant—I don't take any stock in him, either."

"Well, to tell the truth, I haven't much admiration to waste on that gentleman," Jackson Blake remarked.

"Reports say that he led a pretty wild life before the judge's death, although he was shrewd enough to keep it from the knowledge of the judge, in whose office he was, but I fancy the judge did not fully trust him, for when the old man died he left all his property to Margaret Escobedo, only bequeathing his business to his nephew, although that was a fortune in itself."

"As far as I know though, the man is all right, and I sincerely hope he is, for he has full control of all Miss Margaret's affairs, and if he had the mind to play the scoundrel he could rob her of half her fortune, and perhaps be able to get away with the plunder before his rascality could be discovered."

"Waal, I reckon that if anything of that kind was going on you would be apt to have a finger in the pie, hey?" old California Joe observed, shrewdly.

"Yes, I should want to, if I knew of it; but there's the trouble," the Fresh observed, thoughtfully.

"If this lawyer is up to any rascality, he will be apt to cover his tracks, so it will not be possible for an outsider to discover there is anything wrong until the mischief is done."

"It is the talk 'round, too, that he is trying to shine up to Miss Margaret, and a good many folks think he stands a mighty good chance to git the gal, although everybody reckoned you and she would hitch teams."

"Yes, I know that was the talk," the Fresh remarked, a cloud upon his usually bright face. "And I will admit to you, California, that I had a strong notion that way myself; circumstances brought the lady and myself together, and I was able to be of service to her."

"She is a beautiful girl, one worthy the love of any man, and just at this point is where comes my difficulty."

"From the way the lady acts, I am sure I am not disagreeable to her, but whether the feeling which inspires her is love or gratitude is a question."

"Wa-al, 'pears to me it would be mighty easy for you to find out. Ax the gal!" the old mountain-man suggested.

"Yes, the solution of the riddle is easily arrived at, and then comes another trouble," the Fresh remarked, with a doubtful shake of his handsome head.

"Is such a man as I am worthy the love of a girl like Margaret Escobedo?"

"If you could look back over my past life as I can, you would be dubious on this point, I am sure."

"There is an old adage, 'Lucky at cards, unlucky in love,' and a more lucky man than myself with the painted pasteboards exists not on the earth, I verily believe; but I am a firm believer in the truth of the saying, for in love affairs I am not lucky."

"I have won some peerless women in my time, and though for a while all went well, yet some fell stroke has been sure to separate me from them. Death snatched some of them from my arms; in other cases, I have been to blame, for I could not remain quiet, my roving dispo-

sition leading me away in search of adventures, like a knight errant of old, and while I was gone the flower of love withered and died.

"And that is the reason why I hesitate to press my suit with this beautiful heiress. I really fear to succeed. Of course, as a man I desire to win her, for she is a girl well worth any one's wooing, but the thought of what the future may bring forth holds me back.

"In fact, as the boys say, I think I had better do the brother act; I will be a brother to her, fight her battles, protect her from her enemies, but resolutely keep from loving her."

"Darn me, if you ain't the queerest coot I ever struck!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"Now, if I stood in your shoes, I would go for the gal red-hot, and let the future take care of itself."

"Oh, no; if you were in my place, and felt as I do, you would act exactly as I intend to act—but here is the ranch."

It was true, the Escobedo estate was now in sight.

CHAPTER IV.

A BRACE OF RASCALS.

The first house on the Escobedo place was occupied by the superintendent, Lycurgus Houma, the man to whom Old California Joe had taken such a dislike.

The superintendent was a notable fellow, and one who, once seen, would not be apt to be easily forgotten.

He was a big fellow, standing nearly six feet high, broad-shouldered and muscular, a man of forty or thereabouts, with a dark, stern face and a forbidding look.

He had been on the ranch for over ten years, having come as a cowboy and risen to the position of superintendent.

The old cattle king had found him to be a valuable man.

From his size and resolute ways he had been able to keep the cow-punchers in order, and bore the reputation of being an ugly man in a skirmish.

And now, since the property had descended to the old cattle king's daughter, he had had absolute control of the ranch, for, of course, Miss Margaret was not able to direct the business.

In the principal room of his house the superintendent sat, and with him was the young lawyer, Judge Bullifant's nephew, who had succeeded to the judge's business.

Richard King Bullifant, as the gentleman was named, was a man of eight and twenty, a rather dashing-looking fellow, who seemed to have considerable "sporting blood" about him, as the saying is.

Really, he looked more like a card-sharp than a lawyer.

And, in fact, all up and down the Rio Grande Dick Bullifant was known and recognized as a sport of the first water, although it was only recently that he had taken up his residence in the neighborhood, for before the judge's death he had been in charge of a branch office up in New Mexico.

Since his advent in El Paso—his office and residence was in the American town on the Texan side of the Rio Grande—he had paid more attention to amusing himself than he had to attending to his business.

Old, long-headed citizens, friends of the late judge, shook their heads, gravely, when the doings of the young lawyer were discussed, and the prediction was made that if the young man did not attend to matters a little more carefully the vast business the judge had built up would soon vanish.

In fact, after making the acquaintance of the heiress of Escobedo he had spent more time on the Escobedo Ranch than in his office or in attending to his business.

He had become infatuated with the beautiful Margaret at the first glance, and, thanks to having charge of her legal matters, was able to enjoy her society a great deal, by pretending to consult her on subjects connected with the estate.

At the time that we introduce the two men to our readers' notice—the men who had more to do with Margaret Escobedo's fortune than all the rest of the world put together—the lawyer had just entered the ranch and taken a chair at the superintendent's invitation.

"Well, how do you find yourself, Mr. Houma?" Dick Bullifant asked.

"Oh, pretty well, and how are you?"

"Oh, fine as silk!" the other answered. "By the way, I have dropped in to see you on a little matter of business as I have been examining the accounts."

The lawyer made this remark in a careless way, just as if it did not amount to anything, but a dark look came over the face of the superintendent.

"Ah, yes, is that so?" Houma observed.

"Yes, and I find some little things which I cannot account for, and I thought I would see if you could explain them, so I could straighten the account out in the books."

"Well, I don't know," Houma remarked, slowly. "I was not aware that there was anything wrong in my department."

"Yes, it is in your department. The cattle

don't agree with the number set down—there is about a hundred short and the feed amount seems to be unusually large. Altogether I reckon there is over a thousand dollars involved."

"I don't understand it," the superintendent remarked, apparently very much perplexed, yet stealing an odd glance out of the corners of his eyes at the other.

"Of course I have kept this matter strictly to myself," the lawyer explained. "I have not said anything to Miss Margaret, or to any one else, for that matter, in regard to it, for I thought you and I could straighten the matter out."

"The fact is, Houma," continued Dick Bullifant dropping his voice a little, "I didn't know but you needed a little cash and had used some of the estate money."

"It is all right, of course; I know you are perfectly good for it, and I should not kick up any row. I understand that you had been investing in town lots up at El Paso, and there is no question but what you are in for a big thing, if you can only contrive to hold on until the rise comes. And in regard to using the money, I know how that is; I have been in the same boat myself."

"Mebbe you are there now, eh?" observed the superintendent with a grin.

"Oh, no, Miss Margaret is quite a business woman and keeps too strict a watch over me," the lawyer replied.

"Ah, yes, of course! I believe that you know," and Houma shook his head. "Just as if you couldn't fix the books so as to conceal a shortage of ten or fifteen thousand—ay, twenty thousand, without any trouble."

"Not that it makes any great amount of difference as long as you are going to marry the girl," the superintendent added reflectively.

"Yes, but am I going to marry her?" Dick Bullifant asked. "That is an important question, you know, and I am not sure in regard to the answer."

"Well, you have the field almost entirely to yourself, and the fact that you have the control of all the legal affairs appertaining to the estate gives you a chance to have frequent consultations with the girl, and if you do not win her it will not be for want of opportunities."

"Yes, I know that, but I do not seem to make much headway," the lawyer observed with a doubtful shake of the head.

"The girl looks upon me in the light of friend, I know, but I sometimes fear I will never be able to execute any deeper sentiment."

"Well, you ought to be able to do so, although I think there is an obstacle in the way."

"I think I understand what you mean and I was going to speak of that when you said I had a clear field; but the field is not clear as long as this Jackson Blake is in the neighborhood."

"Well, I don't exactly know what to make of the fellow," Houma observed.

"You are aware that there has been a report that he and Miss Margaret were engaged to be married?" the lawyer said.

"Oh, yes, that has been floating around ever since the time when this Blake succeeded in rescuing her from an outlaw gang who had captured her."

"Was it not whispered at the time that Manuel Escobedo had something to do with the matter?" Bullifant asked.

"Yes, there was a rumor to that effect, but how much truth there was in it I am unable to say," Houma replied. "One thing is certain though; about the time of that event Manuel and his sister, Isabel, left the ranch and soon after it was reported they had gone to Cuba."

"Manuel was in love with the heiress, I believe?"

"Yes, and he did his best to win her. It was a wonder that he did not succeed, too, for his sister, Isabel, was the bosom friend of the heiress, and, being her constant companion, had frequent opportunities to plead her brother's cause."

"Do you suppose it was because the girl was in love with this Jackson Blake?" the lawyer asked, shrewdly.

"Oh, no, I think not, yet it is a hard matter to decide," Houma replied.

"Does Blake come here frequently?"

"Yes, entirely too often to suit me," the superintendent observed, with a frown upon his dark face.

"Why, what difference does it make to you?"

"I do not admire the way in which he looks around him," the superintendent replied.

"Ah, does it seem as if he was kind of keeping a watch to see if everything was going on all right?" asked Bullifant, immediately guessing at the idea that had entered the mind of the other.

"Yes, that is it, exactly; he is too infernal inquisitive, and one of these days I shall quietly tell him that he better mind his own business, and confine his attention to his own ranch and not come nosing around this one."

"You will be apt to get yourself in trouble, for this Blake has quite a reputation as a warrior," the lawyer warned.

"Yes, I have heard that he got the best of some fellows in a row in the Mexican town of El Paso when he first made his appearance in

this section, but I can understand how he worked the game. He has six or eight desperadoes with him, and the probabilities are that they did the fighting."

"Very likely. Well, I tell you what it is, Houma, if you choose to aid me all you can to win the heiress I will do my best to help you along. If I see fit to wink, it will be money in your pocket, you know," Bullifant remarked, meaningly.

"Oh, yes, I comprehend that, and I suppose when you spoke about there being some few errors that you wanted to come to an understanding with me."

"Exactly, that was my idea. You and I, by pulling together, can be of a deal of help to each other."

"Undoubtedly!"

"Well, I am willing to go into the thing if you are."

"I am agreeable, and there is big money in it for both of us, but the first point is to keep this Fresh of Frisco from prying around the ranch, for he is just the kind of man to interfere if he thought there was anything wrong."

"Yes, he is inclined that way, and that I suppose is where he gets his nickname; most certainly he is exceedingly fresh."

"I will take some of the freshness out of him at the first convenient opportunity!" the superintendent exclaimed.

"Well, you certainly ought to be a match for him," the lawyer remarked, surveying the muscular developments of the other with an admiring eye. "But he will be apt to go for his weapons, for he will never dare to face you without."

"It will be my game to banter him into a contest with fists, and then I will hammer him so that he will not be able to show himself around this ranch for some time."

"Hello, there he comes now!" Bullifant exclaimed, catching sight of Blake through the window.

CHAPTER V.

THE FRESH EXPLAINS.

THE superintendent jumped to his feet and a dark frown gathered on his brow.

"Sure enough!" he exclaimed. "You are right; it is the Fresh and that lying old mountain-man, California Joe, is with him."

The two were quite a distance away, coming on slowly, their horses walking, the riders engaged in conversation and apparently discussing the appearance of things around them.

At all events this was the conclusion that the superintendent arrived at, and he said as much to the lawyer.

"Well, it really does look like it," Bullifant remarked.

"I reckon I shall have to put a stop to this sort of thing," Houma averred. "I think I have stood this fellow nosing around this ranch just about as long as I ought to, and I may as well give him a piece of my mind to-day as any other time."

"Oh, yes, I do not see why you should put it off so long as you have made up your mind to go for him. I reckon you will have a fight on your hands instanter; that is, if there is any truth in the stories they tell about this fellow's claim to be a big chief."

"I am not so sure that there is any truth in the yarn," the superintendent replied. "One thing is certain—since he has lived in this section he has not had a difficulty with anybody."

"Yes, so I understand; and I remember that my uncle, the judge, before his death, was puzzled to account for it, for when the man settled in this section it was his belief, from what he had heard of the fellow's going on in El Paso, that he was a gambler and a desperado of the first water."

"Most certainly such was his reputation."

"Yes, I have heard the judge speak of the matter, and it was his impression that this Blake would be a very undesirable neighbor, but as time passed on and the fellow did not misbehave himself, he was at a loss to account for it, for it did not seem possible that such a man as he was reported to be should be satisfied to settle down and be content with a rancher's quiet life."

"It doesn't seem reasonable," the superintendent remarked. "And that is the reason why I do not take any stock in these yarns which relate what a desperate fighter he is."

"Yes; but there is no doubt that he did have two or three fights in El Paso about two years ago, when he first came to the banks of the Rio Grande, and that he succeeded in whipping his men," Bullifant remarked.

"I know his reputation in that line is well-established in El Paso, and there are not many up there who would care to pick a quarrel with him, but to my thinking it is as I said; these desperadoes whom he enlisted in his service really did the fighting, and he got the credit for it."

"Possibly your supposition is true, and if it is, he will not be the first man on the frontier who has acquired the reputation of being a dangerous fellow without being entitled to it."

"That is true enough," Houma assented.

The Fresh in Texas.

"My uncle, the judge, had an idea that he was playing a well-planned game," the lawyer observed.

"A game, eh?"

"Yes, he had got his eyes on Miss Margaret; she was one of the richest heiresses along the Rio Grande, and would be well worth the winning. The fellow knew that if shown out in his true colors he stood no chance at all of getting her, and so he sobered down into a quiet rancher and proved himself to be one of the best of neighbors."

"Well, maybe that is the game he has been playing," the superintendent observed.

"My uncle thought so, and I, having a high opinion of his shrewdness in guessing, reckoned that he had hit on the truth, but I must confess that since I have taken up my residence in this section, I have grown a little doubtful about the matter, for, as far as I can see, he is not a particularly ardent wooer."

"That is a fact!" Houma exclaimed. "If he was hot after the heiress he ought to be here twice as much as he is, although I must say he comes too often now to suit me. I should not mind his visits, only I don't like the way he looks around him. He is too infernal inquisitive."

"He certainly is on his good behavior," the lawyer observed. "I have met him once in a while both in my own town and in the Mexican El Paso, and though he takes a flyer now and then at the various games which are running, yet no more than I do myself, or any of the men who gamble a little just to pass the time away."

"I know it, and that is what makes me think that these yarns about his being such a great gambler and desperate fighter are all bosh!" Houma declared. "If he was any such man as he has been represented to be, he would never have been able to keep quiet all this time."

"Well, here he is, and as he is pulling up his horse it is evident he wants to speak to you."

The Fresh and his companion upon arriving in front of the superintendent's house had halted.

"I reckon that if I have any chance at all I will speak to him in a way that he will not like," the superintendent remarked, grimly, as he advanced to the door.

"Yes, since you have made up your mind to it you might as well take the bull by the horns now as at any other time," Bullifant asserted.

The two passed through the door.

The Fresh had just dismounted and given his reins to Old California Joe, for the beast he rode was a spirited animal who could not be trusted to stand without restraint.

"Good-morning, Mr. Houma," said Blake in his easy, pleasant way, and then, perceiving the lawyer in the rear of the superintendent, he greeted him also.

"Morning," replied Houma, shortly.

"How are you off for cows—young ones—have you any to spare, for if you have I would like a bunch?"

"Don't think I have any that I care to sell," the superintendent replied.

"Is that so?" and an expression of astonishment appeared on Blake's face. "Well, I don't comprehend that at all, for I understood that you offered to let Jim Cassidy, whose ranch is just this side of El Paso on the river, have fifty head at eight dollars apiece, all young ones too, and as that is two dollars a head under the market price I thought I would like to take them, as Cassidy was not in a condition to make the trade for lack of cash."

The face of the superintendent grew dark; he was both astonished and angry, for his talk with Cassidy had been a confidential one—he had pledged the man to keep the matter quiet, and he could not understand how the thing became known.

"I reckon some one has been fooling you with a ghost story!" Houma exclaimed.

"Is that so?" the Fresh inquired with the most innocent air imaginable.

"You bet it is!" the superintendent exclaimed.

"And then, if there had been any truth in the matter I reckon the thing would not have fallen through on account of Jim Cassidy not having the cash; to my certain knowledge he had over five-hundred dollars when he was up to El Paso yesterday for I was with him when he received the money."

"Yes, I understood you were with him in El Paso yesterday; I was up there myself, and when I heard about this cattle deal, I reckoned that it was all straight, knowing that you had been with Jim."

"It is not so, and, as I said, if Jim had wanted the cows—if they had been offered to him—he had the cash to pay for them, so the thing would have gone through all right."

"Oh, no," responded the Fresh, shaking his head decidedly.

"What do you mean?" demanded the superintendent, his face dark and a touch of anger in his tone.

"You don't seem to understand, Mr. Houma, that this is a mighty uncertain climate along the Rio Grande, and that because a man has money on Monday it is not safe to bet that he

can show his roll on Tuesday," the Fresh explained.

"That Jim Cassidy had five hundred yesterday in El Paso there is not any doubt, but he couldn't put up that five hundred to-day if his ranch depended upon it."

The superintendent and the lawyer looked at each other; the positive tone of the other amazed them.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I confess I don't understand how it is that you happen to be so well-informed in regard to this matter," Houma remarked.

"The explanation is just as simple as can be," the Fresh answered.

"When I got wind of this cow deal and heard that Jim Cassidy had the stamps to put up, it kinder set me to thinking, for I wanted the cows myself, and I went to work to devise some plan to eucher Jim out of them."

"The deuce you did!" exclaimed Houma, unable to refrain from uttering the exclamation, so surprised and angry was he at the frank avowal.

"Yes, and the result of my cogitations was that I got Jim into a little game of poker, and I won all the money he had as easily as rolling off a log," and the Fresh laughed as if he thought the matter a most excellent joke.

"Yes, I got all the cash he had," Blake continued, "and his note for a hundred more besides, although, as a rule, I don't care to play for notes, you know," the Fresh added in a reflective sort of way. "My principle is to play until my cash is gone and then stop, unless indeed I have got the fever very bad, then I might put up whatever collateral I could raise, but I never gamble on notes. I wouldn't this time if Cassidy had not been hot for me to give him his revenge and insisted that I ought to allow him another show to get square, so I yielded and tackled him again, and the result was that he went into the hole for a hundred more, and that kinder cooled him off so he was willing to stop."

"He gave me a message to bring to you. He said, 'You will be apt to see Mr. Houma tomorrow?' I said, 'Yes,' he said, 'Tell him I reckon I will not be able to make that trade we were talking about.' I said, 'All right,' not letting on, you know, that I had any suspicion what it was about, but I understood that it referred to the cow trade. So I came up this morning to tell you what Jim said, and to say to you, on my own hook, that I will take the cows. You will get just the same money, you know, only I will pay it to you instead of Cassidy."

CHAPTER VI.

A SLIGHT DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

For a moment the lawyer and the superintendent stared at the Fresh in amazement, while that gentleman smiled in a good-natured way, just as if he considered the matter to be an excellent joke.

Houma's rage was none the less intense because he was trying to suppress it in order to imitate the coolness of the other.

"This is a pretty good story of yours, Mr. Blake," he remarked in a decidedly sarcastic way.

"Yes, I think it is pretty fair myself. It is quite a joke to not only eucher a man out of a trade, but also get hold of his money to carry the deal through."

"Of course, I wouldn't like Jim to know it, for he hasn't any idea that I wanted any cows and it might make him feel bad to find out that he has been left so badly," the Fresh remarked.

"From this story I should reckon that you play a pretty sharp game sometimes," the superintendent observed.

"Well, once in a while I tumble into a thing of this sort," Blake replied in a modest way.

"You will excuse the question, I know, when I ask how can I be certain that you are not playing some sharp game on me?" the superintendent said with elaborate politeness.

"Oh, yes, of course; there is nothing like being certain in a little matter of this kind," the Fresh replied.

"Here is Jim's I O U, which will show that I stuck him for a hundred yesterday," and as Blake spoke he produced the note, and as both the others were well acquainted with Cassidy's writing and signature, they were able to decide at a glance that the note was a genuine one.

"Then for further proof," remarked the Fresh as he returned the note to his pocketbook, "when you were with Jim yesterday did you notice his roll—five hundred and twenty-five dollars exactly?"

"Yes, that was the amount," Houma remarked. "I saw the sum paid to him."

"Did you take any notice of the particular bills—would you be apt to know them if you saw them again?"

"Yes, I am certain I would," the superintendent replied. "There were five one hundred-dollar bills, two tens, and a five. The hundred-dollar bills were almost bran new, one of the tens was in good condition, but the other ten and the five was torn and ragged, the five particularly so."

"I reckon you would make a good detective,

Mr. Houma," the Fresh remarked; then he produced a roll of bills from an inside pocket of his coat, and separating some from the others, showed the superintendent five hundred and twenty-five dollars which Houma immediately declared was the money he had seen Cassidy receive on the day before.

"You see, I am giving it to you as straight as a string," the Fresh remarked, returning the money to his pocket.

"Of course I played it on Jim in a way which no doubt he will despise when he comes to find out all about it," Blake continued.

"Still, no one can say that the game was not a square one," he went on. "Jim had just as good a chance to skin me as I had to skin him, and there is an old saying, you know, that all is fair in love and war, and I reckon that can be stretched to cover trade, too, so if you haven't any objection I will take the cows."

"Did I tell you right at the beginning that I hadn't any cows to sell?" exclaimed the superintendent, rather roughly.

"Oh, yes; but I understand that, of course," the Fresh replied, placidly. "You were saving them for Jim; but as Jim can't take them, I will. It is all the same, you know; Cassidy's money pays for them."

"You have been misinformed," the superintendent replied, shortly. "I have no cows to sell to either you, Cassidy, or any other man."

A peculiar look came into the eyes of the Fresh; but the smile did not depart from his lips, and the others had no suspicion that the dangerous mood of Jackson Blake was approaching.

"I don't exactly understand this," the Fresh remarked, slowly. "If you were willing to sell the cows to Cassidy yesterday, why not to me to-day?"

"But you are barking up the wrong tree!" the superintendent asserted. "Whoever told you that I made a bargain with Cassidy yesterday, and agreed to let him have fifty cows, did not know what they were talking about! And then the price is absurd; young cows are worth ten dollars a head."

"Yes, I know that, and that was why I was anxious to secure a bargain," the Fresh responded.

"I am just as ready to pick up a hundred dollars, when it comes in my way, as the next man."

"Well, you will not make any hundred dollars out of me!" Houma asserted. "And I would like to get hold of the man who told you this cock-and-bull story."

"About the cows?"

"Yes."

"You will be astonished when I tell you how I came to know about the matter," the Fresh remarked, with a peculiar, dry laugh.

"Don't I tell you that there isn't any truth in the yarn!" the superintendent exclaimed, angrily.

"I wouldn't say any more if I were you," the Fresh remarked. "You will be over your head pretty soon and will have to swim out."

"What do you mean?" cried Houma, roughly.

"The conversation between you and Cassidy in regard to the cows took place in the bar-room of Big Jake's United States Hotel in El Paso. You were standing at the end of the counter and talked loud enough for me to hear every word you said; I was in the back room reading a newspaper. You were rather off your guard, I suppose, thinking that as there were only Mexicans in the place no one would understand what you were saying, but just by accident, as it happened I heard the whole of it, and as I wanted some cows, I made up my mind to clean out Jim Cassidy and get in ahead."

The face of the superintendent grew dark with rage as he listened to the explanation.

It was as the Fresh had supposed: as there were only Mexicans in the bar-room, Houma had spoken more freely than he would otherwise have done.

Now, too late, he saw his mistake.

"You played the spy upon me then!" the superintendent exclaimed in an extremely ugly way.

"Yes, as it happened, I did, but without intending so to do though," the Fresh rejoined, coolly. "But if men will talk recklessly in public places, they ought not to complain if their conversation is overheard."

"Maybe I should not have paid much attention to it if I hadn't heard you pledge Cassidy to be quiet about the matter, for you didn't want any one to know of the deal."

"Now, Jim, you know, don't bear the best of characters, and has been mixed up in some rather crooked transactions, and there has been talk in this neighborhood that if Jim did not mind his eye, Judge Lynch would get after him some day, and his neck and a long rope would become intimately acquainted."

"So when I heard you tell Cassidy that he must keep the matter quiet, the thought immediately came up in my mind that if you were a man who indulged in any crooked business, Jim Cassidy would be just about the sort of a fellow that you would be apt to pick out for a pard."

"Why, you infernal scoundrel!" cried Houma, and he made a rush for the Fresh, his game

being to clasp him in his strong arms, bear him to the earth and there, kneeling on his prostrate body, pound him at his leisure.

But the Fresh was not taken by surprise by the attack, for he had been watching the superintendent while he had been speaking, as the trained swordsman watches his opponent, and by the glitter of the eyes anticipates the thrust before it is made.

So when Houma rushed upon him he was ready for him.

In an adroit manner he evaded the outstretched arms, and in place of Houma seizing him, he seized the other.

And then, in some really marvelous way—the superintendent was never able to understand or explain how it was done—the sport got his right arm around the brawny neck of his opponent, forced his head under his arm, resting it on his hip; then, with the aid of the other hand, and a powerful swing, the Fresh lifted his assailant fairly from the ground and, turning him in the air, threw him over his shoulder, Houma landing on the flat of his back on the ground with a force that for a moment seemed to knock all the breath out of him.

To use the language of the "Fancy," the Fresh had "cross-buttocked" the superintendent.

Bullifant beheld this performance, a prey to unbounded amazement; being fully as much astonished as the man upon whom the operation had been performed.

For a few moments Houma remained quiet; the shock had been so great that he was unable to rise, but when his breath returned to him he rose slowly to his feet, terribly shaken by the violence of his fall.

The superintendent was big and fat, in no condition for a contest of this kind, and therefore the shock had terribly rattled him.

He was game, though he now understood that when he attacked the Fresh he had caught a Tartar; still, though the idea had come to him that the Fresh knew a thing or two about the wrestler's art which he had not learned, he had hopes that owing to his superior weight and strength he might be able to whip his antagonist.

This time he did not attempt to close in with the Fresh, but essayed to bear him down with a series of massive blows.

One, two! out went his muscular arms, but Jackson Blake parried the blows with the greatest ease, for he was an experienced boxer while the other man was not, and then, with wonderful quickness, he put in two blows, the first, with the left, "steading his man," to use the sporting term, and the second, the powerful right, catching Houma on the front of the jaw.

The superintendent threw up his hands, gasped, and down he went all in a heap.

To use the language of the "ring," he was "knocked out."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FRESH MAKES THE TRADE.

BULLIFANT had been surprised at the result of the superintendent's first attack, but he was still more surprised when he beheld the massive superintendent disposed of thus easily.

"Great heaven!" he cried, "have you killed the man?"

"Oh, no, bless you he is worth a dozen dead men," the Fresh replied. "He has only got a lesson in boxing which will be apt to open his eyes a little. When he gets over this little tap he will understand that he is not so terrible a fighter as he thought he was."

"If you have got some water handy a dose might do him good."

Bullifant was quick to improve the hint and the superintendent soon revived.

With the lawyer's assistance he rose slowly to his feet, and then, leaning on Bullifant's arm glared at Blake.

"I will have your heart's blood for this!" the superintendent exclaimed.

"Oh, no, you will not! nothing of the sort!" the Fresh replied briskly. "I have not got any more blood than I want myself and, most decidedly, hav'n't any to spare. But if you are not satisfied—and some men are very hard to suit—we can settle the matter now for good and all!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"I reckon you are heeled—few men in this region who are not. I am, and if you are eager for blood, out with your revolver, and we will get to work as soon as you like."

Bullifant at this point felt called upon to interfere, for he saw that the superintendent had been so shaken up by the punishment which he had received, that he was not in a fit state to go into a revolver duel.

"Of course it is none of my business," he said, "but, really, I think that this affair had better not proceed any further at present. Mr. Houma has acted a little rashly, and, when he comes to think the matter over, I am sure he will see that he has been in the wrong."

This speech gave the superintendent time for reflection, and, despite the wrath which inflamed his blood, he was able to see that it would not be wise for him to carry the quarrel further at present.

"You have got the best of it," he admitted, the speech being spoken most unwillingly,

though, "but I reckon that in the long run I will be able to turn the tables on you."

"All right, I am agreeable, and hold myself in readiness to give you satisfaction in any way that you may desire, and at any time," Blake remarked.

"But, one thing I should like to know: how do you propose to proceed in this matter?" he asked. "Is it understood that this fight is to be renewed the next time we meet—is either one of us at liberty to shoot on sight?"

"Most certainly not, I should say!" the lawyer declared. "Mr. Houma, I am sure, is no desperado of that kind. Among gentlemen such a thing is unknown. If, upon consideration, Mr. Houma does not feel satisfied, he will proceed to seek satisfaction as is usual among gentlemen."

"Yes, that is the way I like to do business!" the superintendent declared.

Houma was not particularly quick-witted, but he had sense enough to see that the course the lawyer had mapped out for him was the true one for him to follow.

From the experience that he already had of the Fresh's quality, it was apparent that if open war was declared, his opponent would be pretty certain to get the best of the fight; but, if he bided his time, the opportunity might come for him to catch his man in such a way as to give him a decided advantage.

"Mr. Bullifant expresses my sentiments," he remarked. "For the present we will consider this thing settled."

"All right, that suits me," the Fresh replied. "I am not going around kicking up rows. In fact, since I have taken up my residence here on the Rio Grande, I have tried to keep out of all the difficulties I could, but if war comes, then, of course, I do my level best."

"That is only natural," Bullifant remarked in his smooth way.

The lawyer had made up his mind that the Fresh was a dangerous fellow, and that the best way to get an advantage over him was by the use of craft and trickery.

"These little misunderstandings will happen," he continued, "and a man cannot help getting into a difficulty sometimes."

"Well, since this matter is settled, how about the cows?" Blake remarked. "As you were willing to sell them to Cassidy, I do not see why you should object to sell them to me."

The superintendent comprehended that he was in a corner, and there was no way for him to crawl out, as far as he could see.

As the reader has probably suspected, Houma had been indulging in a little "crookedness" when he made the bargain with Cassidy for the cows.

The Fresh had spoken correctly in regard to Jim Cassidy when he had asserted that the man did not bear a good reputation.

Cassidy had been detected in some very questionable transactions since he had dwelt by the Rio Grande, and if he had not begged off, and succeeded in settling with the men whom he had wronged, he undoubtedly would have been driven out of the country.

And so, when Blake overheard the conversation between the two relative to the stock, he suspected at once that there was something wrong about the transaction, particularly when the superintendent offered to let Cassidy have the cows for two dollars a head less than the going price, on condition that he kept the matter a profound secret and paid the cash at once.

It was Jackson Blake's idea that Houma intended to play the rascal. He thought the superintendent purposed to keep the transaction a secret and pocket the money, and that was the reason why he had inveigled Jim Cassidy into a game and despoiled him of his wealth.

If the transaction was all open and above board, of course it did not make any difference to Houma who bought the cows, for one man's money was as good as another's, but if the superintendent intended to put the cash in his own pocket, then he could not dispose of the cows except to some one who would keep the transaction a secret.

The manner in which Houma had acted, showed the Fresh that his suspicion was correct.

The superintendent was a rascal.

Then, as Houma puzzled his brain for an explanation that would appear reasonable, a bright idea came to him.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I would like to oblige you in this matter," he said, "but I don't really feel like standing the loss of a hundred dollars, for you know the cows are worth ten dollars a head."

"But you were going to sell them to Cassidy for eight," the Fresh urged.

"That was only a little taffy to lead Jim on," Houma explained. "I don't know as you have ever had any dealings with Jim—"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, then, of course, you don't understand what a mighty peculiar man he is to do business with. If I had asked him ten dollars a head, the regular going price, he wouldn't have wanted to trade at all, but I led him on with the offer of two dollars a head less than the cows are worth; then, when he came to close the deal, I should have told him that I had made a mis-

take, that the cows were worth ten dollars a head, and that I could not let them go under that figure, and this is where Jim's peculiarity comes in. When he came with his money in his fist to close the deal and found the price had advanced, he would stand the ante and close the trade."

"Ah, yes, I see," exclaimed the Fresh, with a beaming smile. "If you said ten at first, Jim wouldn't have had it, but after he got into the thing he would give the figure!"

"Yes, exactly."

"Well, it takes all sorts of men to make a world," Blake observed, philosophically.

"That is so; as I said, a man must be well acquainted with Jim Cassidy to know how to take him."

"Then the price is ten a head?"

"That is the figure."

"I will go it, for I want the cows," the Fresh remarked. "Where are they? I should like to take a look at them."

"Certainly. I've got them shut up in the corral in expectation of Cassidy's coming, and if you will walk over you can see them."

"All right. I am your man."

The party proceeded to the corral, which was not the regular one attached to the superintendent's house, but a rude affair on the edge of the ranch next to the road.

Blake comprehended at once how the scheme would have been worked had he not won Cassidy's money and so prevented the deal.

The corral being on the road and remote from the rest of the ranch, the cattle could be driven away with very little probability of any one on the place knowing anything about it.

The cows were good ones, well worth the money, and the Fresh concluded the trade at once.

"I'll send over for them this afternoon," Blake said, as he mounted his horse. "By the way, is Miss Margaret at home?"

"No, she is off for a ride."

"It is no use for me to call then. Well, so long!"

And then the Fresh and Old California Joe departed.

Houma and the lawyer watched the pair until they disappeared around the bend of the road, and then they took their way back to the superintendent's quarters.

"Well, the reports in regard to this fellow's skill as a fighter are correct," Bullifant remarked.

"Yes, curse the luck! I stood no chance at all, although I look to be more than a match for him," the superintendent replied gloomily.

"Oh, he is a regular prize-fighter!" the lawyer declared. "Any one could see that from the way he handled himself."

"I don't know whether he is as expert with his firearms as he is with his fists, but I mean to find out!" Houma declared.

"Look out that you don't give him a fair chance, or else he may lay you out," Bullifant warned.

"Oh, I will hatch some scheme to catch him at a disadvantage, be sure of that!" the other exclaimed. "You may be satisfied that I will not rest until I have full measure of revenge, and if I cannot wipe him out myself, then I will call others to my aid."

"That is the safest game, and I will do all I can to help you!" the lawyer declared.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FRIENDS.

ALONG by the bank of the yellow Rio Grande, following what was known as the river trail, rode two as fair maidens as the bright Texan sun had ever shone on.

One was Margaret Escobedo, the heiress of the old cattle king, the richest girl by far in all that section of country, and the other was her bosom friend, Pauline Melville.

The two girls were a most decided contrast to each other, for Margaret was tall and slender and queenly in her carriage, with a wealth of golden hair and the clearest, deepest blue eyes that mortal woman ever possessed, while her friend was short in stature, extremely plump, with dark-drown eyes and hair.

The position in life occupied by the two were as different as their looks, although both were orphans, but while Margaret was as wealthy a girl as could be found all along the line of the Rio Grande, thanks to the old cattle king's money, Pauline was entirely dependent upon her own exertions.

She and Margaret had been chums at school in the East, and at that time, owing to the fact that Margaret's mother had fled from the old cattle king, carrying her child with her, the two not being able to agree, Margaret had no more expectations than her friend.

And when their school days were over, and the two went out into the world to earn their living—for although Margaret's mother held a good position, yet she preferred that her child should be able to take care of herself, for at that time neither one ever expected to receive a single penny from Estevan Escobedo—the two secured positions together, and so the friendship continued.

Then came the sudden death of the old cattle

king and the news that Margaret was his heir; the death of Margaret's mother followed shortly afterward, and Margaret's journey to the West to take possession of her inheritance separated her from Pauline.

The two corresponded regularly though and when owing to the misconduct of Manuel and Isabel Escobedo, her cousins, and who had been her companions on the ranch, they were compelled to go away, and Margaret was left alone, she sent for Pauline to come to her, and the girl gladly obeyed the summons.

As Margaret said in her appeal to her friend: "Why should you toil as hard as you have to for a bare living while I have everything that the heart of a woman can desire? Come and share my fortune with me!"

Miss Pauline had now been an inmate of the Escobedo Ranch for some two months and had become pretty well accustomed to the peculiar life, so different to what she had been used to in the East.

The two girls had been indulging in a brisk gallop and had now pulled their steeds into a walk so as to breathe the animals, and this afforded an opportunity for conversation.

"That is a nice ranch over yonder," Pauline remarked, as they rode past a thrifty-looking place.

"Yes, it is a well-kept estate."

"Let me see; I do not remember to have ever noticed that ranch before, although this is not the first time I have been along this road," Pauline remarked, reflectively. "Who lives there?"

"Mr. Blake."

"Oh, the Fresh, as they call him!" the other exclaimed.

"Yes, but I really think it is utterly absurd to bestow such a title upon him!" Margaret remarked, spiritedly, a tinge of color in her cheeks and her eyes flashing.

"So it seems to me, but then they have such a strange habit in this country of bestowing all sorts of nick-names upon people. Sometimes they fit very snugly, but in this case, I confess, I do not see anything fresh about Mr. Blake, excepting that he has a cool, easy way with him, quite a contrast to the rough boisterousness of the most of these Texans."

"Mr. Blake is not a Texan, you know; he is from California."

"Oh, yes, I know that; his nick-name gives that information—the Fresh of 'Frisco, you know; isn't it utterly ridiculous?"

"Yes, so it seems to me, and I confess that since I have been acquainted with the gentleman I have not seen anything in his bearing, or conduct, that would suggest such a name."

"As you say he is cool and quiet, but not at all forward, as this ridiculous nick-name would imply."

"That is true enough!" Pauline assented. "Now the majority of young men living in close proximity to such a pretty girl as you are—to say nothing of myself—would be sure to have found some excuse to call in every day or two, but since I have been here I do not believe he has called once a week."

"It was the same way before you came," Margaret remarked. "About once a week, seldom oftener."

"But he was welcome, wasn't he, Margaret?" Pauline asked, with a shy glance at the face of her friend.

"Welcome!" Margaret exclaimed, in deep, earnest tones. "Why, Pauline, Mr. Blake is as welcome to my house as the sun!"

"That man saved me from a position of the greatest peril, and while I live I will never forget the service he rendered me—repay it I can never hope to."

"You might, by giving him your precious self, eh?" Pauline exclaimed, mischievously.

The heiress of Escobedo crimsoned from her neck to her temples, and her confusion was most manifest.

"Oh, forgive me, Margaret, I did not mean to wound you!" the other exclaimed, deeply regretting her careless speech, and then she passed her arm, caressingly, around the waist of Margaret.

"I only said it to tease you, and I did not think you would care."

"Oh, it does not matter," the heiress replied, forcing a smile, although there were tears in her eyes.

"I am foolish to allow you to tease me, but then I know that Mr. Blake's name and mine have been coupled together, and I am sensitive in regard to the matter."

"That is true, for during my brief stay here I have heard many a sly hint that the Fresh, as they all call him, would, probably, one day be the master of the Escobedo Ranch."

"Yes, the gossip has come to my ears."

"Well, I really wonder at the talk, for, as far as I can see, the gentleman does not act at all like a lover."

"Oh, no, no one could with justice accuse him of paying me any particular attention."

"He seemed to me like a devoted friend—a brother as it were, whom you might depend upon in the hour of need."

"And such he has been to me ever since we first met!" Margaret exclaimed.

"I came to this far southwestern land alone and friendless and fell immediately into the power of enemies whom I firmly believed to be my friends; in my trusting innocence I was an easy dupe."

"That I can readily believe," Pauline remarked, "for you are unsuspicious by nature and would not be apt to think evil of any one."

"I inherited the fortune which others coveted," Margaret explained. "But my death was not desired, for in that case there were a hundred heirs and even my father's vast estate would be divided into so many parts that none of the heirs would be satisfied with their share, so these pretended friends arranged a plot of which I was to be the victim."

"The scheme was to place me in a position of peril from which I could only escape by marrying one of these pretended friends, and it would, probably, have succeeded too, for in my innocence I did not dream of the trap into which I had fallen, had it not been for Mr. Blake who came to my rescue in the very nick of time."

"How extremely romantic!"

"It was extremely fortunate for me, for his timely arrival saved me from becoming the prey of as base a villain as there is in all this wide world."

"And how was it that Mr. Blake happened to know of the matter?" Pauline asked with all the natural curiosity of her sex.

"Just by accident he got a hint that there was something wrong, and with the perseverance of a bloodhound he followed on the track until he succeeded in baffling the plans of the conspirators and saved me from becoming their victim."

"That is where his freshness comes in, I suppose," remarked Pauline with a laugh.

"Yes, I presume so, for I was a stranger to him, and he braved the enmity of a powerful band of desperadoes by interfering, but he did not count the cost and in the end succeeded in defeating the plans of the villains."

"I have heard a little gossip in regard to this matter since I have been here," Pauline observed.

"The principal actors in the affair were your cousin, Manuel, and Isabel Escobedo?"

"Yes, the two whom I believed to be my firm friends."

"It must have been a dreadful blow to you when you discovered their treachery?"

"It was, for I never suspected it."

"Did you have any little tender feeling for Manuel?"

"Oh, no, although he professed to be my devoted admirer, but as a lover I never cared for him."

"And the other, Mr. Blake, he has never sought to woo you? You see I am awfully anxious! You don't mind my asking, do you, dear?"

"No; in our school-girl days we had no secrets from each other, and I will be as frank with you now," Margaret replied.

"Mr. Blake likes me, I know; his eyes have told me so many a time—his lips never! He is always just the same as you have seen him, pleasant, perfectly polite and respectful, but never attempts to woo me in a lover-like fashion."

"Oh, Margaret, confess now, if he did you would not be angry!" Pauline exclaimed, archly.

"Well, I must wait until that happens, you know, before I shall be sure," Margaret replied, demurely.

"One thing is certain," she added, "I am not likely to woo him."

"Perhaps he hasn't courage to try to win such a great heiress as you are," Pauline suggested.

"Of course I don't know about that, but as far as regular courage goes I believe from what I have seen of him that he would not hesitate to fight a lion, for he does not seem to know what fear is."

"Yes, I have heard people say too that he is a gambler and a desperado, and all that, but I don't believe it!"

"Neither do I; he may not be any better, but he certainly is no worse than the other gentlemen of the neighborhood as far as I am able to discover."

And after this the conversation passed to other subjects, but the lively Pauline, with all a woman's shrewdness, made up her mind to have a talk with the Fresh and see what he really thought about the matter.

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN'S WIT.

PAULINE pondered over the conversation all the way home, and the more she thought upon the subject the greater became her determination to seek an interview with Jackson Blake and see what he had to say about the matter.

In the solitude of her apartment, after her arrival at the ranch, she discussed the question with herself, for there was not a soul in the house to whom she dared to speak on the subject.

"It is a shame, so it is!" she declared. "Margaret loves the man, although she is not willing to acknowledge it; but I do not blame her for

that, for it is not maidenly for a girl to admit she cares for a man who does not take the trouble to woo her.

"And what is the reason that he doesn't?" Pauline asked, abruptly.

"There is some reason for it, of course. Margaret admits that he, with his eyes, has betrayed that he likes her; and if that is true, and there is no cause to doubt it, for a girl like Margaret is too sensible to be deceived, then it is very strange he does not strive to secure the prize all the rest of the gentlemen in the neighborhood are so anxious to win."

"As I said before, there must be some good reason for it, and I am no true Yankee girl if I don't find out what it is."

"Margaret is unhappy over the matter; I can see that clearly; and if I can discover what obstacle there is in the way, perhaps I may be able to remove it."

"Anyway, as Margaret's friend, I ought to do all in my power to promote her happiness, and I feel sure from what she has said—or not so much from what she said as the way in which she said it—that she would gladly be wooed and won by the Fresh of 'Frisco."

The chapter of accidents favored Miss Pauline in her design, for, a short time after she formed this resolution, she overheard a couple of the herdsmen speaking in regard to the Fresh coming for the cows that afternoon which he had purchased.

"Aha!" exclaimed the girl, delighted at the opportunity; "now I will have a chance to meet Mr. Blake, just by accident, and if I don't find out just what he thinks about the matter, then I am not as smart as I think I am."

So, Miss Pauline found it convenient to take a walk down by the corral that afternoon at about the time that Jackson Blake and his men were expected to come for the cows.

She arrived just in season to see the cattle depart, and when the operation was completed and the cows were on the road, Pauline said, with her sweetest smile:

"Are you not coming up to the house, Mr. Blake? It is quite a time since you favored us with a call and I rather guess you think we are not good company or else you would come oftener."

Of course the Fresh could not refuse such an invitation and so he accompanied Miss Melville to the house.

But upon arriving there, after Pauline had escorted the gentleman into the parlor, and summoned a servant to announce Mr. Blake's arrival, to Miss Escobedo, the discovery was made that the ladies of the next ranch above on the river had carried the heiress off for a visit.

Of course the sly young woman knew that Margaret was absent when she invited the gentleman to the house, for otherwise she could not have secured the opportunity of enjoying a private interview with him.

"Well, now, I am so sorry you are disappointed," she said, "for of course I cannot entertain you as well as Miss Escobedo!"

"Oh, I don't know about that!" the Fresh replied, gallantly. "I am afraid you are not doing justice to yourself, for I am sure that you can be fully as entertaining as Miss Escobedo."

"Yes, that may be, but if she was here there would be two to entertain you instead of one—double attraction you see."

"Ah, but you do not consider that I may be like the gentleman who declared, how happy he could be with either, if the other dear charmer were away!" Blake rejoined.

"I do not doubt that that is true, but I think you are real mean to say so, for of course I understand that you would a great deal rather that Miss Escobedo were here to entertain you than poor me," Pauline declared, with an affected pout.

"Oh, now you have got it all wrong," the Fresh answered. "It is your charming self who is the attractive one. I am positive that any gentleman who has the good luck to spend an hour in your agreeable company will not have cause to complain that he has not been pleasantly entertained."

"I am afraid that you are a sad flatterer, Mr. Blake!" Pauline exclaimed, shaking her finger at him, warningly.

"Oh, no, nothing but the truth comes from me I assure you."

"Well, one thing is certain, my bank account is not so attractive as Miss Escobedo's!" Pauline exclaimed, with a laugh.

"Yes, there isn't any mistake about that, and, I presume, a good many men in this world would really prefer a handsome bank-account to a handsome woman," the Fresh remarked.

"I don't believe that your tastes run in that way," the girl observed.

"You are right there; there isn't anything of the fortune-hunter about me."

"Yes, I feel sure of that!"

"Really you compliment me!" and the Fresh bowed politely.

"Oh, your actions show that you are not mercenary."

"How do you make that out?"

"Why, the way in which you act toward Miss Escobedo."

"I don't think I get your meaning exactly."

"Miss Escobedo is the richest girl in all this section—that is true, isn't it?"

"She has that reputation."

"And as a consequence almost every gentleman for miles around is a suitor for her hand."

"Yes, but I do not think it is hardly fair for you to assume that all her suitors are attracted by the fact that she is the wealthiest girl in the district," the Fresh observed. "For you must remember that Miss Escobedo is a very beautiful woman, and then being a blonde too, her style of beauty is in direct contrast to the type usually seen along the Rio Grande, and that renders her more attractive."

"So I think it is hardly fair to assume that all her admirers are attracted by her wealth and none by her beauty."

"Well, I guess my statement isn't exactly correct," Pauline admitted, "but you are leading me away from the point which I desired to make, and that is that neither Miss Escobedo's wealth nor beauty seemed to be potent enough to attract you."

"Ah, now you are putting a leading question to me, as a lawyer would say," the Fresh replied, laughing.

"Well, I am not a judge to compel you to answer it if you do not want to, you know," the girl replied, archly.

"But you are anxious to learn, though?"

"Am I not a woman?"

"And therefore curious, eh?"

"I will have to admit the fact, I suppose."

"Well, it is a subject about which I should not care to converse in public," Blake observed, slowly. "But I think I can afford to make an exception in your favor, for I feel sure you are a devoted friend to Miss Escobedo, and would do all in your power to insure her happiness."

"Yes, indeed I would," Pauline exclaimed, promptly. "Why, Mr. Blake, we have been friends ever since we were children, and if we were sisters I do not believe we could love each other any better than we do."

"Ob, I have noticed that you seem to be devotedly attached."

"Yes, I would do almost anything for Margaret, and I am sure she would do as much for me," Pauline declared. "And I will admit, without beating around the bush, that I am puzzled to account for your indifference, particularly as I understand that you have a most decided claim to Margaret's gratitude."

"I presume she has informed you, then, of the rather strange way in which we became acquainted."

"Yes, she told me the really romantic story," Pauline replied. "Why, Mr. Blake, it is just like a chapter out of a novel."

"It was rather odd, there is no mistake about it; but this is a wild country along the Rio Grande, and events happen here that could not possibly occur in a more civilized community."

"You acted like a hero, Mr. Blake, and if there is any man in the world who deserves to win Margaret Escobedo you are the man," Pauline declared, in her emphatic way.

"I am very much obliged to you for the compliment," the Fresh remarked.

"Ah, but it is not an empty compliment," the girl rejoined. "It is the truth. You saved her from a dreadful fate, for what can be worse for a woman than to be forced into a marriage with a man whom she cannot love?"

"That is very true, and I suppose to carry out the romance, I ought to lay vigorous siege to Miss Margaret."

"Yes, most decidedly, and I confess my curiosity is excited. There is some good reason for it, of course. Possibly you are already in love, and so are not heart-free."

"Oh, no, there isn't anything of that kind to interfere," the Fresh replied.

"Of course I will not attempt to deny that I have met girls whom I have fancied, and they in return have looked with favorable eyes upon me, but all these are in the long ago; none of them recent enough to interfere with my paying suit to Miss Escobedo if I was disposed so to do."

"And why don't you?" asked Pauline with true feminine bluntness.

Blake laughed at the directness of the question.

"You must really forgive me!" Pauline hastened to exclaim. "I know that it is perfectly awful for me to be so inquisitive, but I cannot help it."

"Oh, no, of course you are not to blame, you were born that way."

"Yes, I suppose I was."

"Well, as I am always glad to gratify a lady, I am disposed to satisfy your curiosity," the Fresh remarked.

"Of course I should not care to go around and proclaim this from the house-tops," he added.

"Certainly not, but you can rely upon my discretion."

"Of that I feel assured, or else I should not converse at all with you in regard to the matter," Blake remarked gravely.

"Now then, I will freely admit to you that I am not at all blind to Miss Escobedo's charms. I think she is as lovely a girl as I have ever had

the pleasure of encountering, and fully believe that she is as good as she is beautiful."

"Oh, yes, there isn't a doubt of that!" Pauline exclaimed.

"And any man, no matter what may be his station in life, peasant or prince, might esteem himself fortunate to win the love of such a peerless girl."

"You are certainly right in that statement! Margaret is worthy the love of any man, no matter who or what he is!" Pauline declared.

"And that is one of the reasons why I hesitate to enter the lists with the rest of her suitors," the Fresh remarked.

"Now, Miss Melville, I am going to be honest with you, and honest with myself," he added. "I presume you have been long enough in this section to have heard plenty of stories about me?"

"Oh, yes; and I have been here long enough, too, to understand that gossip here is just like gossip everywhere else; one must not believe all they hear."

"That is true enough; there is an old saying that a good story never loses anything in the telling, and I think it is a very true one. I suppose you know that though Jackson Blake is my name, yet another appellation has been affixed to me by which I am as often called as by my baptismal name."

"Oh, yes, the Fresh of 'Frisco," Pauline replied, smiling at the odd conceit.

"And I suppose you have heard, too, that my character is none of the best?"

"Yes, but I do not pay any attention to these idle stories, nor does Miss Escobedo," the girl replied immediately.

"Margaret and myself were conversing about the matter recently, and she said that during all the time you have lived here you had conducted yourself in the most proper manner, and no one could, with truth, say a word against you."

"I am very glad indeed to learn that Miss Escobedo has such a good opinion of me," the Fresh remarked.

"Then she does not believe that I am a desperado and a card-sharp, going about like a raging lion seeking whom I may devour?"

"No, indeed!" Pauline declared, emphatically. "Your life during the time that you have lived here is a complete answer to that accusation."

"Yes, that is true enough. I have behaved myself pretty well since I settled here by the banks of the Rio Grande, but I will make the honest confession that I have led a pretty wild life. A desperado, in the true sense of the word I have never been, although I have never hesitated to defend myself when attacked, and, to speak the exact truth, have been involved in quarrels which I could have kept out of if I had so chosen: that is where the Fresh comes in, you know. My peculiar disposition causes me to interfere in matters which do not concern me, like this case of the conspiring against Miss Escobedo; if it had not been for my freshness I should never have been mixed up in that."

"It was a most fortunate thing for her that you did take an interest in the matter though," Pauline observed.

"Yes, as it happened it was, and now another point. I am accused of being a gambler, and I must acknowledge that I have seen the time when I depended upon cards for a living. Of course I can come the old game and swear that I always played fairly and all that, but that doesn't wipe out the fact that I depended on cards for my bread and butter."

"Of course, to look at the matter in the light in which it would be regarded in the East, it seems to be a dreadful thing," the girl observed.

"But out in this country everybody seems to play cards, and although it may be that I am not a competent judge, yet to me there does not seem to be such a great difference between the man who plays cards for amusement, as long as he ventures money on the result of the game, and the one who makes a living by card-playing. One thing to my mind is certain: if the gentlemen who only play for amusement would stop amusing themselves in that way, the regular gamblers would be apt to starve to death."

The Fresh laughed, for to his mind the girl's words were not only true but amusing.

"Well, I think you are right, although the world at large will not be apt to agree with you, but that is a mere matter of opinion, of course. But now, just look at the matter: my past life has not been a particularly creditable one; the woman who marries me will be apt to hear some ugly stories once in a while, and a good many people will be apt to hold up their hands in holy horror at the union."

"Then, as I am odd and peculiar by nature, it may be possible that I will not be content to settle down into a quiet, hum-drum life. I am not certain of myself, maybe; and now then, don't you think there are good reasons why I do not strive with the rest of the gentlemen of this neighborhood to win the heiress of Escobedo?"

Pauline smiled and shook her head.

"These reasons of yours would be swept away like chaff before the wind if you really loved Margaret!" she declared.

"And there is another point stronger than all the rest!" the Fresh resumed.

"What is that, pray?"

"I may be so doubtful in regard to my chance of winning the heiress that I am afraid to risk it."

"If you are troubled about that, then decidedly you haven't any right to your nick-name!" the girl exclaimed.

Blake laughed, and after a few more words took his departure.

"Fortune is pushing me along whether I will or no," he soliloquized, as he rode away from the ranch.

"Is it fated then that I am to win this peerless beauty?"

CHAPTER X.

SEEKING THE OLD JEW.

THE two Cubans sat together in the office of the Hotel Mexico, in El Paso.

They were in a corner remote from the rest, and so were able to converse without danger of being overheard.

"Now, then, what should be our first move in this game?" the elder, Gomes, asked of the younger, Esparto.

"That is difficult to say at present, for we are not yet thoroughly posted in regard to the ground," the other replied.

"We have secured the alcalde and the chief of police, and they will aid us to the extent of their power; but, according to the talk of the landlord, and the loungers in the hotel with whom I have conversed, the Fresh has become an extremely popular man in El Paso during the last year, and we must be careful how we attack him."

"I suppose he is popular because the bullies of the town are afraid of him," observed Gomes with a sneer.

"That's about the truth, I think, and yet, as far as I can learn, he has not been concerned in any quarrels for a long time."

"The town made the discovery that he was a dangerous man right after his arrival in this section, and he has been given a wide berth ever since."

"That is probably the truth, and any attack which we make on him must be planned in the most careful manner; and now, before we begin to scheme, I would suggest a visit to old Hadad Solomons," Esparto remarked.

"That is not a bad idea," Gomes observed, approvingly. "The old Jew is a shrewd fellow, and is usually able to give good counsel."

"He will know exactly how the land lays, and undoubtedly his advice will be valuable."

"Let us go at once, then," Gomes suggested.

So the two left the hotel and made their way to the Jew's house, which was on a side street, running from the plaza, as the readers who made the acquaintance of the Hebrew pawnbroker in the tale entitled "The Fresh on the Rio Grande," will remember.

Gomes rapped on the Jew's door when he reached it, and after a brief interval a sliding panel in the upper part of the door opened and the yellow, weasel-like face of the eminent Hebrew appeared.

This was the regular custom of the pawnbroker.

No one gained admission to his premises until he had made a careful examination of them by means of the small window in the door.

"This is Mr. Solomons?" said Gomes.

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish mine name."

"This gentleman and myself would like to see you on a little matter of business," Gomes explained. "We are strangers here in El Paso, and come from the Island of Cuba."

"We bring you news of an old friend of yours," Esparto added, "Manuel Escobedo."

"Ah, yesh—mine gootness!" exclaimed the old Jew. "I haf not heard from mine fr'en, Escobedo, for many a long day."

"Shust wait a moment, mine fr'en's, and I will let you in."

The pawnbroker then closed the panel, and the sound of moving bolts and bars was heard.

"The man has his house guarded like a fort," Esparto remarked.

"Yes, the old fellow is rolling in wealth and he is afraid of being robbed by some desperate fellow, and so he has fortified his mansion in a manner fit to resist anything but artillery," Gomes answered.

Then the door opened, and the tall, lean figure of the Jew appeared.

He was clad in a rusty suit of black, so shabby that it is doubtful if he, or any of his tribe, would have been willing to advance a dollar on it.

He cast a piercing glance at the Cubans, and the eyes of the old man, although deep sunken in his head, were as keen as the orbs of an eagle.

Then, the scrutiny having apparently been satisfactory, he opened the door widely and bade them enter; and after they were within the house he closed the door and carefully adjusted the fastenings again.

This operation performed, he turned to the Cubans and inquired:

"Mine fr'en's, do you vant to raise any money on anyt'ing?" and he rubbed his skinny, talon-like hands together, and showed his yellow teeth in what was intended to be an agreeable smile.

"No, we do not desire a loan," Gomes answered.

"All we seek is advice," Esparto added.

"Advice, eh?" and the old Jew favored his visitors with another searching glance as though he wished to read their very souls.

"Yes, and we have an idea, too, that it may be possible we can put some money in your way."

"Aha, dat ish goot—monish ish goot; he, he!" chuckled the old man.

"Times are hard now—I cannot much make, and I shall be glad if you gifes me a chance to do somet'ings."

And then the pawnbroker produced chairs and invited his visitors to be seated.

"How may I call your names, mine fr'en's, if you please," he asked, as he seated himself, facing the Cubans.

"My name is Gomes," said the elder.

"And mine is Esparto," added the other.

"And you said you brought me news of Manuel Escobedo," mused the old man. "Vell, vell, I am glad, for he vas a goot fr'en' of mine. Is he vell?"

"He is dead," was the reply.

CHAPTER XI.

SOLOMONS ADVICE.

"DEAD, eh, Manuel Escobedo ish dead, eh?" the old man murmured in a reflective way, rubbing his hands softly together, but he did not seem to be particularly astonished.

"Yes," and then Gomes related how the Escobedos, brother and sister, had perished when the trading schooner went down.

"Vell, vell, dot ish bad," the Jew remarked, and all the time that Gomes had been speaking he had been closely studying the faces of his visitors.

"Yes, the account of Manuel Escobedo was abruptly closed," Gomes remarked. "And just at a time too when he was preparing to return to El Paso and strike a blow at the foe who had driven him from his native land."

And then the Cuban told the story of Isabel Escabedo's wealthy marriage, and the death of her husband, which had brought all the money to her.

"Owing to this fortunate circumstance, you see, Manuel Escobedo was in a condition to come back to El Paso and wage effective war against the man who drove him away."

"Yesh, yesh, I see; you speak of dis Jackson Blake, der Fresh of 'Frisco?" said the old pawnbroker. "He ish a bold fellow, dot Fresh!"

"That is the man," the Cuban replied. "Manuel Escobedo bore him a deadly hatred and swore when he was driven away from El Paso that he would never rest until he was avenged.

"Manuel is dead, this gentlemen and myself were his bosom friends, and to us has come the fortune that Isabel acquired by her marriage, and to us too has descended this legacy of vengeance, and we have come to El Paso expressly to square the account of Manuel Escobedo with this Fresh of 'Frisco."

"Yesh, yesh, I see," and all the while the old Hebrew was studying the faces of his visitors with the utmost attention.

"Manuel had completed all his arrangements for returning to El Paso when he met his death on this ill-fated voyage," Gomes explained. "Myself and cousin here," and he nodded to Esparto, "were to accompany him and aid in carrying out his scheme of vengeance, so we knew all his plans, having fully discussed and arranged the matter; and when the news of his untimely death reached us, we determined that as soon as we could settle affairs we would come and carry out the plans as originally arranged."

"Ah, yesh, I see," the Jew observed, with an approving nod.

"I have gone into this explanation so you will understand how maters stand," Gomes continued.

"Manuel Escobedo had no secrets from us; we know all the particulars regarding his past life here in El Paso, and understand who were his friends and confederates in the old time. We have already seen the alcalde and his brother, the chief of police, and arranged with them for their assistance, so we will have strong backing here in El Paso."

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish goot!" the Jew exclaimed. "The Parrals are fine men and they always stick to their frien's."

"And now we have come to enlist you in our enterprise," Gomes remarked.

"Mine gootness, v'ot can I do?" cried the pawnbroker, apparently much surprised.

"Why, you are to help as exactly as you helped Manuel Escobedo in the old time," the Cuban replied.

"About the first thing we intend to do is to revive the band of the Red Riders of Rayon, for we will need an organized force to cope with the Fresh of 'Frisco and the desperadoes whom he has at his back; and when the band is formed it will put money in your pocket just the same as it used to do."

"Oh, well, I am always ready for a trade, of course, mine fr'en'," the Jew remarked.

"We are in dead earnest in this matter and

are determined to compass the death of this accursed Fresh of 'Frisco!" Gomes said, with firm determination.

"Oh, it will be a difficult job!" the old pawnbroker declared. "That man is a devil! Yesh, mine fr'en's, dat ish it exactly! Dot Fresh of 'Frisco ish a devil, and dere ish not money enough in dis world to hire me to fight mit him."

"Why, mine fr'en's, v'ot you t'ink? When he first to El Paso did come, he raised monish from me on a loan—then he cleaned out some of der gamblers, and der next day when he come back to pay up, so help me, Moses! if he did not rope me into a game and beat me out of three hundred dollars!"

"Is it possible?" Gomes exclaimed.

"It is," the old man replied, with a deep sigh. "He fixed der thing so dot it looked as if I could skin him out of three hundred dollars, and I was fool enough to t'ink dot I could beat a sport like he ish at his own game."

"And be beat you, eh?" Gomes observed.

"Yesh, mine gootness! as slick as der whistle! I tell you, mine fr'en', I want no more to do mit dot mans!"

"He has had a good run of luck since he struck El Paso, but it is about time for it to change," Esparto observed.

"I for one do not care to buck against him," the Jew replied, decidedly. "And, if you will take my advice, when you go for him you will have der t'ing fixed so dot he will have no chance at all, or else he will beat you."

"Oh, we will make the trap so strong that when he is once in, there will not be much chance to get out," Gomes declared.

The old pawnbroker shook his head in an extremely doubtful way.

"Ah, mine fr'en', you will find that to be a very difficult matter, I t'ink. The Fresh has goot men with him, and unless you have a big band of Red Riders he will be certain to beat you."

"We are in no hurry, but can afford to wait until a favorable opportunity arrives," the Cuban remarked.

"We have not allowed the grass to grow under our feet," Esparto observed. "Although we have not been long in El Paso we have already commenced to enlist men for our band. Thanks to Manuel Escobedo's instructions we have been able to put our hands right on the men we need—good, trusty fellows who were in the old band, and a couple of them are the men who used to attend to the business with you."

"Dot ish goot! I do not new men like, for until they are tried you cannot tell anything about them."

"That is our idea, and we are securing all the old men we can get at."

"So, Manuel Escobedo is dead," the old Hebrew remarked, gazing at the Cubans in a curious way as he spoke. "Vell, I am sorry for dot. I liked Manuel; he vas a goot feller; and den, too, dere vas a leetle balance of a hundred dollars due me—"

"Oh, that is all right!" Gomes exclaimed, immediately. "I will settle that. Bring me pen and ink, and I will give you an order on Bunker Weinholdt for the cash."

The Jew hastened to comply with the request, and was greatly delighted upon receiving the money.

And then the Cubans departed, the old Hebrew escorting them out with many professions of how glad he would be to serve them.

But after they were gone, and Solomons had securely locked, bolted and barred his castle again, he shook his head in an extremely doubtful way.

"When the game was played der last time, der Fresh won mitout any troubles," the old Jew muttered. "Mebbe he vill not be able to do der trick dis time, but I would not be villing to bet much monish on dot, for he ish a devil, and der mans dot fights mit der devil must get up in der morning early. All der same, I am glad dot der Red Rider band is to go again."

"A goot bit of monish did dot band bring to me, but if dey go for der Fresh dey must keep their eyes peeled, or dot mans will clean dem out."

The Cubans retraced their steps toward the Hotel Mexico.

"The old Jew is as cautious as ever," Gomes remarked.

"Yes; he was never willing to take any risks," Esparto observed. "It was always his game to get all the money he could without putting himself in a position so he could possibly be implicated."

"Well, I suppose the old fellow is not to blame for wanting to play a safe game," Gomes replied. "That is characteristic of his race the world over."

"That is true enough."

At this point the two turned from the side-street into the plaza, and, as they did so, they came face to face with a rather shabbily-dressed man, a little under the medium height, with a dark, olive face, and a decidedly foreign look.

A single glance at his countenance, though, to a judge of nationalities would have revealed his race.

The high cheek-bones, peculiar thin face, pointed mustache and imperial, jet-black in hue, as was the hair which curled almost as tight as a negro's wool to his head, told that he was a Frenchman.

Under his arm he carried a long, slender bundle.

Upon meeting so abruptly with the Cubans the Frenchman lifted his hat with all the politeness of his race.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said, speaking English quite fluently, and with only a slight accent, "but I am a stranger here in this city, and crave information."

"Certainly, sir, we will be happy to accommodate you if it is in our power," Gomes replied, as he and his companion returned the man's salutation.

"I am in search of a Hebrew gentleman—one Solomons—although for the life of me I cannot think of his first name, which is an odd, barbarous one, I was told to take the second street, and this I think is ze one."

"Hadad Solomons, the pawnbroker?" Gomes said.

"The same! Alas, gentlemen, you behold an unhappy adventurer, reduced by dire misfortune to the necessity of pawning the tools by means of which he lives."

"I am a fencing-master, by name, Louis de Charny; by reputation, second to no man in Europe, stranded in this accursed wilderness on account of a little trouble in the City of Mexico, where I had the misfortune to severely wound a relative of the President who presumed to doubt my skill as a swordsman."

"I was compelled to fly, on the road was robbed of my purse, and am now reduced to seeking a miserable Jew in order to raise a loan on a pair of rapiers which have not their equal in America."

The Cubans looked at each other, for the same brilliant idea had occurred to both.

"Here was a man to fight the Fresh of 'Frisco!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ADVENTURER.

"YES, my dear sirs," continued the Frenchman, "by a most unfortunate combination of circumstances I was forced to fly from the City of Mexico, where, thanks to my skill as a swordsman, I had established myself in first-class style."

"I have led a life of adventure, gentlemen, and in my time have met with many misfortunes, but this last was the crowning blow. You are true gentlemen, I can see that with half an eye, and therefore you can appreciate my position, otherwise I should not have troubled you with my story."

As we have said, the same idea had occurred to both the Cubans the moment they made the discovery as to who and what the stranger was.

It had not taken them long after the Frenchman had told his story to arrive at a true understanding of the fellow's character.

In the island of Cuba they had encountered just such another man, only he was an Italian master of the sword instead of a Gaul.

He was a quarrelsome wretch who took advantage of the fact that he was a superb fencer to treat all with whom he came in contact—that he did not hope to make a profit from—with annoyance and disdain.

If any gentleman took offense at his conduct this polite cut-throat was quick to declare that if he had given offense he was ready to receive a challenge and give the challenger full satisfaction.

Before the man's true character became well-known, some few hot-headed young men were fools enough to allow themselves to be drawn into a quarrel with the bully, and this was exactly what the fellow wanted, for it afforded him an opportunity to advertise himself in the most effective way.

The man being an expert fencer easily succeeded in getting the best of his opponents, and after his victories was able to carry matters with a high hand.

In two or three cases it was suspected too that the swordsman had allowed himself to become the tool of another and had taken pay to fight the battles of men who did not possess courage enough to face in open fight the men they hated.

For a good round sum in money the adventurer espoused the quarrels of these men, took occasion to insult the foes whom they dared not face, and so provoked them to an encounter in which his skill enabled him to achieve a victory.

And the idea had come to the Cubans that with the Frenchman some arrangement might be made whereby he could be induced to provoke the Fresh of 'Frisco into a quarrel, and if such a scheme could be carried out—and it seemed feasible, for the Fresh was not the kind of man to stan' any nonsense from any one—there was very little doubt that the adventurer would not have much difficulty in disposing of the Californian, for although Blake might be an expert with revolver and rifle, it was not likely that he was a master of the sword.

The only difficulty that appeared to the Cu-

bans was to get the stranger to consent to play the role of a bravo.

The first point was to prevent the man from obtaining any money from the pawnbroker and so force him to rely upon them for assistance.

This idea likewise came to the minds of both of the Cubans, and immediately succeeded the inspiration of using the stranger as a bravo.

Esparto was the first to speak.

"My dear Mr. De Charny, I can assure you that I fully appreciate your position!" he exclaimed, "and I feel sure that this gentleman, my cousin, Fernando Gomes, has the same thought as myself—my name, by the way, is Sebastian Esparto."

"I am charmed to meet you, gentlemen," and the Frenchman shook hands with the pair in the warmest manner. "Of course, as I said before, it was easy for me to see that you are men whom any gentleman might be proud to know."

"Now, in regard to this Hadad Solomons, the old Jew pawnbroker," the youngest Cuban remarked, "let me warn you not to place much confidence in getting any assistance from him, for he is the greatest miser in business that was ever seen."

"Yes, I was informed that I would not find him an easy man to do business with, but what can a man do under such circumstances?" the adventurer asked, shrugging his shoulders like a true Frenchman.

"I want money, and I know no one in this place; who can I go to but to some wretch like this old Jew, who thrives upon the distress of his fellow men?"

"Very true!" exclaimed Gomes, and his companion nodded assent.

"And I presume as it is, that I will only be able to raise a trifle upon as elegant a pair of swords as the cunning hands of the artisan ever forged."

"I doubt if the Jew will be willing to negotiate at all," Esparto remarked with a doubtful shake of the head. "As a rule he will not advance more than the tenth of the value of anything, and then the article must be one that he can readily dispose of if it is not redeemed."

"And you understand, of course, that there is not much of a market for dueling-swords in a town like El Paso," Gomes added.

"Very little indeed," Esparto remarked. "I presume you have been long enough in this country to understand that the favorite weapon here is the revolver."

"Yes, yes, I understand that," the Frenchman replied. "Why, not one man out of a hundred knows anything of the use of the sword!"

"It would be nearer the mark, I think, to say one out of a thousand!" Esparto exclaimed.

"Most decidedly that comes nearer to the truth," Gomes added.

"Ah, yes, gentlemen, I have no doubt you are right, and I feel that I am in a most unhappy situation," the Frenchman observed.

"The sword is the only tool of which I am the master, and how in the world I am ever going to get out of this miserable plight in which I find myself is more than I can tell, as I am without money and without friends."

"You are wrong there, My dear Mr. De Charny, you are not without friends as long as my cousin and myself are in El Paso!" Esparto declared.

"Sebastian voices my sentiments!" Gomes hastened to add.

"Ah, gentlemen, it was a fortunate thing which led me to accost you," and the Frenchman, with true Gallic impulsiveness again shook hands with the others.

"But come! let us hasten to this old Jew and see if he will do anything for you!" Esparto exclaimed.

"We will go with you. Although we have never had occasion to do much business with the old Hebrew, yet we are well acquainted with him, and he has always professed a great desire to oblige us, and now there will be a good opportunity to put his words to the test," the young Cuban continued. "By aiding you he will be serving us."

"Yes, we will talk strongly to the old skin-flint," Gomes added. "But I assure you that I place little reliance upon what he says. For all that he has ever professed a desire to be able to serve us, I have an idea that he would drive just as hard a bargain with us as with anybody else."

"Well, well, we can put his professions to the test!" Esparto exclaimed. "Our intercession can do our friend here no harm, if it be not productive of good."

"And I assure you, gentlemen, I shall appreciate it all the same!" the adventurer declared.

"Come, then, let us hasten!" Gomes said.

In company then with the Frenchman, the Cubans retraced their way to the abode of the Jew pawnbroker.

As before, they rapped on the door and the Jew surveyed them through the little sliding panel in the portal, and the moment that his face appeared, Gomes said:

"My dear Mr. Solomons, we have come to introduce a gentleman who desires to transact a little business with you. He is a stranger in El Paso and has been directed to you, and it has

given us great pleasure to assure him that you will do as well by him as any man he can find in the town."

"Oh, yesh, yesh!" the old Jew exclaimed. "I am always glad to be able to accommodate the fr'en' of my fr'en's!"

"Shust vait a moment, gentlemen, and I vill der door open for you."

Then the Jew closed the panel and the sounds of the moving bolts and bars were heard.

"He speaks fairly enough," observed the Frenchman in a low tone to his new-made friends, "but that is where the craft of these cunning Jews comes in. They are always smooth and soft in speech, even when they have made up their mind to strike you a deadly blow."

"Yes, that is true," Gomes remarked. "A man is never safe in building upon their words."

"And this old rascal is the biggest fox of his race," Esparto added.

The opening of the door at this point ended the conversation.

With the greatest civility the old Jew escorted the three into his house, taking care as usual, to securely fasten the door after the visitors entered.

"This gentleman is a friend of ours," Gomes explained, "and as you have often said that you would be glad of a chance to oblige us if we ever needed any accommodation in your line, we hope you will treat this gentleman well and we will consider it a favor done to us."

"Yesh, yesh, I shall be delighted!" Solomons declared. "I will be sure to do all I can for the gentlemans."

"Mr. De Charny, Mr. Solomons," and as the Cuban introduced the Frenchmen he fell a little in his rear and by so doing was able to warn the Jew of the game that was to be played by shaking his head in a decided manner.

"Yesh, yesh, glad to meet you mine fr'en!" exclaimed the Jew, rubbing his hands and ducking his head in the most servile manner.

"I find myself a little short of money, unexpectedly," the Frenchman explained, and I desire to raise a loan on a elegant pair of French dueling swords which I have here."

And the adventurer made a movement as if to remove the wrappings around the swords, but the pawnbroker stopped him.

"My tear sir, I would be glad to let you have some monish, but swords are worth not'ing to me, I could not on der best of them afford to advance a single t'ollar!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HIRING THE BRAVO.

THE Frenchman looked disgusted.

"But you have not seen the swords!" he said, in protest. "Will you not take a look at them?"

"Oh, no, it is no use!"

"But they are beautiful tools, and you may change your mind when you see how good they are. I assure you that no duke, prince or king in the whole of Europe possesses a finer pair!"

"My tear sir, I do not doubt dot," the old Jew replied. "But be they goot or bad it is all the same; no one in El Paso vants any such t'ings. If dey vas pistols or guns now, we could do business; but swords," and the old man shook his head in an extremely emphatic way—"my gootness, no! Dere is no chance for me to get mine monish out of such things. You sbust ask these gentlemens," and the pawnbroker appealed to the Cubans.

"They will tell you that nobody in this part of the country has any use for swords."

"I am afraid that Mr. Solomons is right about that," Gomes observed.

"Yes, when men quarrel in this region they always settle the matter with knives, pistols, or, in rare cases, rifles," Esparto remarked.

"Ah, gentlemen, it is a barbarous land, and my evil star was in the ascendant when I set foot on these shores!" the Frenchman declared, in a melo-dramatic way.

"Of course we are on the very frontier of civilization," Gomes remarked.

"Yes, yes, that is true enough, and it was an unlucky hour for me when I was persuaded to come to Mexico," De Charny remarked.

"But the tale which was told to me was a glowing one; it was ze land of flowers and of gold, they said, and a man like myself, with 'carte and tierce' at his fingers' ends, could not fail to win a fortune in a wonderfully short time."

"True, for a while I did fairly, but not as well as I would have done in any European capital, and then, when misfortune came, there was no escape."

"In Europe, no doubt, it would have been different," Esparto remarked.

"Oh, yes!" the Frenchman exclaimed, "for in the old country there is not a city of any size without fencing-masters; and, if a gentleman in my line finds himself short of funds, all he has to do is to seek out the principal swordsman and challenge him to an encounter."

"Yes, yes, I see! A capital idea!" Gomes exclaimed, and Esparto nodded assent.

"A man with a reputation, like myself, can always find plenty of backing," De Charny de-

clared. "And then by betting judiciously, a man can always put money in his pocket whether he wins or loses."

"Yesh, yesh, the scheme is a good one!" the pawnbroker declared.

"By Jove! I have a splendid idea!" Esparto declared.

"Let us hear it!" Gomes exclaimed.

"Why could not our friend play such a game right here in El Paso with our help?" the young Cuban asked.

The others shook their heads.

"But I think it can be done!" Esparto protested.

"Oh, no; where in such a town as this—a miserable hole—will you find a man who could encounter a swordsman like myself?" the Frenchman asked.

"It is not possible!" Gomes exclaimed.

"He exists not in the town!" cried the old Jew.

"I see you do not catch my idea," Esparto remarked.

"Explain it then, my dear sir, and you can rest assured I will jump gladly at any chance to get out of ze scrape in which I now find myself," De Charny declared.

"There is no swordsman here, of course, for this is not a country favorable to the development of sword fighters, but we have men here who pose as bullies—men who are expert with weapons, and so are quick to give and take offense, trusting to their reputation and skill to bring them out victors," Esparto explained.

"Yes, that is the very truth—this Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco as he is called, is just such a man," Gomes observed.

"Dot ish so!" exclaimed the old Jew. "Dot man would mid der lion fight, if der beast wagged his ears mit him."

"A fire-eater, eh?" and the Frenchman rubbed his hands, gleefully, together while his face lighted up as though he was anxious to encounter just such a man.

"Yes, such is the reputation he bears," Esparto replied.

"He has managed to come out the victor in several encounters in which he has been engaged since he made his appearance in El Paso, and these affairs have given him such a good opinion of himself that it would not be a difficult matter to draw him into a quarrel."

"Oh, no, I know the breed well, and it is the same in all lands!" De Charny declared.

"A man of that kind is always on the lookout for a chance to show the kind of metal that is in him."

"Exactly! Well now my idea is for you to meet this Fresh of 'Frisco and contrive to quarrel with him. As I have said, that will not be a difficult matter."

"Not at all!" the Frenchman exclaimed.

"The Fresh has always been ready enough to quarrel with any one who came in his way," Gomes remarked.

"Mine gootness! dot mans is as quick to fight as t'e sparks to fly up mit demselfs!" the old Jew declared.

"Arrange the affair in such a way that he will be compelled to challenge you," Esparto said.

"Of course—that is the game, always," the Frenchman replied.

"Then you can say that in all such affairs of honor in which you have been engaged the challenged party has the choice of weapons," Esparto continued.

"Undoubtedly, that is the code in all lands where the duello is known," the swordsman remarked. "And as the challenged party, having the right to a choice of weapons, I shall choose swords."

"Aha, but de Fresh of 'Frisco ish no man's fool!" the old Jew exclaimed. "When you say swords will be not smell der mouse and refuse to fight?"

"Oh, he will not dare to do that if he sets himself up for a cock of the walk, for if he did, I should make no bones of accusing him of showing the white feather!" declared the Frenchman, arrogantly.

"Oh, I do not think there is any danger of the Fresh declining to fight with swords!" Esparto exclaimed. "He has such an overweening confidence in his own abilities that he will be likely to agree to fight with any kind of a weapon, no matter how strange or unaccustomed."

"That is also my idea," Gomes remarked. "He is a man with a wonderfully good opinion of his own talent, and in the blindness of his conceit he will be apt to think he will be able to handle a sword, although he is not accustomed to the weapon, as well as though it was a revolver or rifle."

"Oh, since I have come to this country I have met hundreds of such men!" the Frenchman declared.

"The fools had no idea that there was any art in sword-play," he continued. "According to their notion all that a man has to do is to take the sword in his hand and poke away at his opponent."

"I've had little affairs with a dozen or two such idiots in my time, and have succeeded in teaching the most of them a lesson which they

will not be apt to forget while life remains," the Frenchman added with great complacency.

"There is no need to worry ourselves in regard to whether the Fresh will fight or not in my opinion, for from what I know of the man I do not think there is the slightest doubt about the matter!" Esparto remarked in an extremely positive way.

"He will fight upon slight provocation and will not be apt to grumble in regard to the weapons; and as it is hardly possible that he can be an expert swordsman, our friend here ought not to have any trouble in overcoming him."

"Rest easy in regard to that!" the Frenchman exclaimed in a tone full of confidence. "Be the man an expert, or the greatest ignoramus who ever took a blade in hand, I will engage to give him his quietus in a workman-like manner.

"You must not think I am boasting, gentlemen, when I tell you there are but three swordsmen in the known world whom I will admit to be my masters, and before those three men all Europe bows in admiration of their genius."

"There is no doubt in my mind that you will be able to finish this Fresh of 'Frisco without any trouble!" Esparto asserted. "That is, if he is foolish enough to dare to face you, sword in hand."

"He will do it," Gomes declared. "The man is rash and foolhardy in the extreme, and in a case like this his overweening faith in his prowess will be certain to lead him into the trap."

"Yesh, he ish a devils, and I believe would rather fight dan eat," the Jew exclaimed.

"If I can only get him to confront me, sword to sword, I will engage to take a little of the devil out of him," the Frenchman observed, boastfully.

"All the sporting men of El Paso have a high opinion of this Fresh of 'Frisco as a fighter, simply because he has been lucky enough to be successful in the few encounters in which he has been engaged," Gomes explained. "And after you arrange the details of the fight, and the news spreads that a stranger had dared to engage to fight the Fresh of 'Frisco, all these cunning sporting men will be certain to be eager to bet all the money they can raise upon the Californian. My cousin and myself will not hesitate to take all the bets that we can raise money to meet, and as we, luckily, happen to be flush just at this time, we will be able to back you to a larg. amount."

"Then, too, as you are a stranger, and no one here has any idea of what kind of a fighter you are, the chances are great that about all the betting men will be anxious to back the Fresh of 'Frisco, and so we will be able to get good odds, for there will not be likely to be many besides us two who will dare to venture their money on you; so if you succeed in beating your antagonist we will make a small fortune, and of all our bets you will receive half."

"That is a bargain," the Frenchman exclaimed; "and within ten minutes after I cross swords with the Fresh of 'Frisco I will engage to lay him out as stiff as a red herring, for I always fight to kill!"

"We will provide you with what money you require, and to-night you will be apt to meet your man."

The Jew was pledged to secrecy and then the rest departed.

CHAPTER XIV.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

THE two Cubans and the Frenchman proceeded directly to the Hotel Mexico.

On the way, Gomes counted out fifty dollars and gave them to the Frenchman.

"Thanks!" exclaimed the adventurer, all his good spirits returning now that he saw a chance to get out of the hole, as he termed it, into which evil fortune had cast him. "You may rest assured, gentlemen, I will not long remain your debtor!" he declared. "That is, if the Fresh of 'Frisco has blood in his veins and not water."

"If the fellow will quarrel, and dares to meet me with swords, and the gamblers of El Paso have sufficient sand—as you say in this country—to back their man I will engage to win a sum amply sufficient to carry me back to France, and I can assure you, gentlemen, that if I once again cross the seas and set foot on the Continent of Europe no inducement will ever tempt me to this New World again."

The Cubans replied that they did not think there was any doubt about the scheme succeeding to a charm.

And after they arrived at the hotel and De Charny secured a room, he unpacked his swords and proceeded to show the Cuban how expert he was in their use.

Gomes had taken lessons and so knew something about the matter, but Esparto was completely ignorant, so the elder Cuban and the Frenchman had a fencing-match while the younger man looked on, displaying great interest.

De Charny was indeed a master of the sword. In a bout of ten minutes he touched his oppo-

nent a dozen times, and each one of the thrusts would have been a deadly one if the encounter had been in earnest, while Gomes was not able to gain a single point, although the Frenchman was pleased to remark, in a patrouizing way, that he did not handle the sword badly, and that with plenty of practice under the direction of a good teacher there was little doubt that in time he would make more than an average fencer.

"I do not believe this American can be as expert with the sword as I am," Gomes remarked, after the bout was ended, "for men of his race are not much given to sword exercise, their tastes running to knives, pistols and guns, and I am unable to see that the fellow has a chance for his life if he once faces you, sword in hand."

"Oh, I will force him to that when I once get a chance at him!" the Frenchman exclaimed, with a fiendish grin.

"He will be apt to be in the hotel to-night, for the landlord told me this morning that he was expected by some party whom he has to see on cattle business," Gomes remarked. "The Fresh has a ranch a short distance down the Rio Grande."

"I wonder if he will have a presentiment, when he quits his place for his visit to El Paso this evening, that he has taken his final leave of it?" the Frenchman remarked, with his demon-like smile.

"I fancy not," Esparto replied. "The chances are that Dame Fortune will not trouble herself to warn him that he is coming to his fate when he rides up the river trail this evening."

"And thus it is in life—how many men walk blindly on to their graves!" De Charny observed with the air of a philosopher.

"How do you propose to bring on a quarrel?" Gomes asked.

"Ah, my dear friend, do not ask me, for I do not know," the Frenchman replied.

"In all such matters I trust to the impulse of the moment. But do not fear; if the opportunity does not come, then I will make one. Be satisfied that if this Fresh of 'Frisco enters the walls of the Hotel Mexico to-night, he will not leave them until I have fastened such an insult upon him that, if he has any blood in his veins, he will be obliged to take notice of it."

"If the Fresh of 'Frisco has not altered wonderfully since I saw him, you will not find it a difficult matter to provoke him to a quarrel," Esparto remarked.

"Well, that is what I like," De Charny replied. "I am quick myself, and I like men who are prompt in action. A slow fellow is my aversion."

"By the way, I should think that it would be a good idea for Sebastian and myself to conceal the fact that we are friends of yours until after the row takes place," Gomes observed. "For if the Californian gets the impression that you are a stranger, and entirely without friends, he will be apt to quarrel and fight with you according to your ideas."

"The thought is a good one!" the adventurer declared.

"Yes, so it seems to me," Esparto remarked.

"Decidedly so!" De Charny exclaimed. "By working the game in that way no one can possibly suspect that we three arranged a nice little trap wherein to catch this bold Fresh of 'Frisco and all the gamblers of the town. It will be an excellent joke to beat these wolves at their own game, ha, ha, ha!" and the Frenchman laughed long and merrily, and the others joined in the glee, for they thought that this cunningly-devised plan would surely compass the death of the man whom they baited, and so feared that they were loth to expose their own precious person in an open contest with him.

"The way we must work the trick is, after the row takes place—if everything goes on well, and I succeed in arranging the duel—I will appeal to the crowd: 'I am a stranger; are there any gentlemen present who will oblige me by acting as my seconds?'

"I see; and that will be our cue to step forward and offer our services," said Gomes.

"It is well planned," remarked Esparto, thoughtfully. "No one will be apt to suspect that the Fresh is the victim of a carefully-devised plot."

"And the betting men!" cried the Frenchman; "think how we will fleece them of their gold! No one here knows aught of me but you two; no one knows but what I may be the greatest blunderer that ever took a sword in hand!" And again the adventurer laughed loud and long.

The plan being all arranged, the three judged it wise to separate so that no suspicion might be excited.

Time passed on—slowly enough to the conspirators, who were anxious for the shades of night to descend, so that the plot might be executed.

Night came at last, and the plaza of El Paso began to be brilliant with lights.

By nine o'clock all the places of public resort were well filled, and at five minutes past nine the Fresh of 'Frisco, accompanied by Old California Joe and Dave Ringwood, Blake's ranch

superintendent, entered the bar-room of the Hotel Mexico.

The Frenchman occupied a seat near the door, and a few paces from him sat the two Cubans, and the moment that Jackson Blake made his appearance Gomes quietly made a sign to De Charny.

The Frenchman rose to his feet and sauntered across the room.

He was not quite sure which was the Fresh, for Dave Ringwood was a dashing-looking fellow, the once shabby gambler having improved wonderfully in his personal appearance since he took service with Jackson Blake, so in order to be sure, the Frenchman said to one of the loungers, whom he chanced to meet as he approached the bar, before which the Fresh's party had halted:

"Isn't one of those gentlemen named Blake?"

"Yes, the tallest one on this side; most folks call him the Fresh of 'Frisco, though."

"Ah, yes, I thought I had seen the gentleman somewhere."

Then De Charny sauntered up to the bar and took a position by the side of Jackson Blake.

All of the Fresh's party had ordered ale and the glasses of the foaming beverage were being placed on the counter when the Frenchman took up a position by it.

De Charny stood at Jackson Blake's right side, the Fresh was standing half sideways to the counter, so that his back was to the adventurer.

"Well, gentlemen, here we go," he said, and he took up his glass as he spoke.

Then the Frenchman deliberately jogged his elbow so as to spill some of the liquor in the tumbler.

The action was performed in such a way, there could not be a doubt that it was no accident.

Blake turned and surveyed the adventurer.

"Hello, what did you do that for?" he asked, a slight trace of surprise in his tone, but no trace of excitement.

"What is the matter with you?" demanded the Frenchman, in a loud and arrogant tone, which immediately attracted the attention of every one in the room to the sport.

"Did I tread on you?" he continued.

"Oh, no, not to my knowledge, but you jogged my elbow and so caused me to spill my ale," the Fresh said, in his quiet way, and as he spoke he was attentively studying the face of the other, for he understood well enough that the stranger had touched his elbow on purpose to draw him into a quarrel, and he was wondering why the man had taken the notion into his head, for at the first glance he recognized that the other was a foreigner, and one whom he had never met before.

The question of course immediately arose in his mind as to why the man wished to have a difficulty with him.

He was no common fellow, filled up with cheap whisky, and anxious to make a name as a chief by "climbing" one of the "good men" of the district.

The stranger was not one of this kind, but a man who had evidently been used to good society, although his attire showed that at present he and good fortune were not on the best of terms.

No drunken ruffian, no frontier desperado—what then was this man, and what was the motive that inspired his action?

"You cannot expect to occupy the whole of the bar!" cried the Frenchman, and he made a movement as if to shove rudely against the Fresh, but the movement was not made, for Blake concluded there had been talking enough, so, promptly, he dashed the ale in the face of the Frenchman, a movement which took that gentleman completely by surprise, for the liquor for a moment almost took his breath away and half-blinded him, and before he could recover from the effect the Fresh of 'Frisco caught him by the nose and rung it until the other yelled with pain, dancing about like a turkey on a hot plate.

The Cubans were right—the Fresh of 'Frisco was not a difficult man to quarrel with, as the adventurer had discovered to his cost.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHALLENGE.

The Frenchman was almost crazy with rage; in all his life he had never been treated in such an outrageous manner, and the assault had been committed so quickly that he was powerless to resist.

When he was released he fell back a step or two, and then, in his blind exasperation, forgetting all about his carefully arranged plan, thinking only of taking immediate vengeance on the man who had insulted him so grossly, he rushed upon the Fresh of 'Frisco.

But the Frenchman, for all his expertness with the sword, was as innocent as a child of any knowledge of the boxer's art, and as he rushed at Jackson Blake he struck "round arm" blows that the other parried without the least trouble.

The Fresh gave ground before the attack, retreating slowly, and, much to the astonishment of the bystanders, he made no efforts to return

the blows which the other was showering upon him so liberally.

It was plain to all the bystanders that it was not because he did not know how, for from the easy way in which he was "handling" himself, it was plain, even to the lookers-on who were not posted in regard to the boxer's art, that he was an expert in that science.

The reason for his forbearance was soon made manifest though.

To defend himself from the attacks of such a complete tyro in the manly art of self-defense as the Frenchman was but child's play, and with a single blow of his iron-like fists he could have routed his attacker right in the beginning, but the Fresh of Frisco was annoyed at the unprovoked insult, and had determined to give this bold and arrogant foreigner a lesson which would be apt to teach him caution in the future. So he retreated before the assault, contenting himself with parrying the blows without attempting to return any, until the Frenchman was forced to pause for sheer want of breath.

Striking violent blows which fell only on the empty air is about as fatiguing an exercise as can be found.

Then when De Charny halted, completely tired out, Jackson Blake, with wonderful quickness, began an attack, but he used only the palms of his hands as weapons, slapping the Frenchman in the face, but with such force that the slaps resounded through the room like pistol-cracks, and the pain fairly brought the tears to the eyes of the adventurer.

Infuriated by this treatment, with a last desperate effort De Charny essayed to close in with his tormentor, but with a single blow, delivered right between the eyes, Jackson Blake stretched his antagonist on the floor, and the man went over as if he had been shot.

The moment he struck the floor it was plain to all in the room that the contest was ended, for the Frenchman had had all the fight in the fisticuff line knocked out of him.

Blake took a single look at the prostrate man, saw that he had got his fill, then he turned to the barkeeper and said:

"Will you have the kindness to give me another glass of ale? mine got spilt, but these little accidents will happen, you know, in the best regulated families."

The spectators looked at each other in amazement, for the Fresh was as cool and unconcerned as though "knocking out" an arrogant stranger was a common, every-day occurrence.

The bartender hastened to draw the ale, and as he placed the glass upon the counter, he could not help paying a slight tribute to the hero of the hour.

"Thirty years have I juggled tumblers behind a counter!" he exclaimed. He was a middle-aged man with iron-gray hair, yet as spry and active as any young fellow. "Yes, sir, thirty years have I hauled benzine over a bar, and in that time I have seen some pretty lively skirmishes, but I never saw a man laid out in a nicer way in my life.

"Gentlemen, I want you to take a 'ball' with me on the strength of this."

This was something remarkable, for the barkeeper was known to be a close-fisted fellow, bearing the nickname of Stingy Jake, and had never been known to stand treat during all the time he had been behind the bar of the Hotel Mexico, so the effect of his tribute to the genius of the Fresh produced a great impression.

By this time the two Cubans, who were terribly disgusted at the miserable display that the adventurer had made, thought it worth while to come to his aid.

"I hope the man isn't killed!" Gomes exclaimed.

"It looks like it," Esparto remarked.

"Oh, no, he will not mind a little thing like that," the Fresh replied, in his careless way, but as he spoke he fixed his keen eyes in a searching glance upon the two strangers.

"I only put him to sleep for a while; he will soon recover, and although he may not be as good-looking as he was before he got into this little scrape, yet he will know a deal more.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Oh, no!" Gomes hastened to exclaim. "I only spoke in the interest of humanity."

"If the man is badly hurt he ought to receive attention," Esparto remarked.

"Get a little water, sprinkle it in his face and that will be apt to fetch him to his senses again," Blake advised.

The barkeeper filled out the water, Gomes took it and hastened to the side of the prostrate Frenchman, Esparto following, while the rest gathered around, the only ones in the room who retained their positions being the Fresh's party at the bar.

"What will you take, gentlemen, this round, which is on me, you understand?" the barkeeper asked.

All called for ale as before, and while the man was drawing the liquor, Blake said to his companions:

"Did either of you ever see those two foreign-looking chaps before?"

"Nary time," replied Old California Joe.

"Never ran across them to the best of my remembrance," Ringwood remarked.

"Well, their faces are not familiar to me," the Fresh observed, "but their voices are, and I would be willing to bet all I have in the world, or ever expect to get, that I have met the two, although for the moment I cannot place them. I have a pretty good memory for faces, and a really wonderful one for voices. A face though may pass out of my recollection, for time often makes great changes, but when I once become familiar with a man's voice I am certain never to forget it, although, as in this case I cannot always decide where I encountered the man to whom the voice belongs, or identify him by name."

"That is a mighty valuable gift, sure as you ar' born!" the old plainsman remarked.

"No doubt 'bout that," Ringwood assented. "Another odd thing about this matter is that the impression has come to me that these voices belonged to people who were no friends of mine."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Old California Joe in wonder.

"Well, that really goes a leetle ahead of my time," Ringwood declared.

"It is rather odd, but that is my impression," Jackson Blake remarked.

The placing of the ale upon the counter put an end to the conversation.

"Here's luck, gentlemen," remarked the barkeeper, who had also filled out a glass for himself. "And the next time, Mr. Blake, that you knock a man out in this really wonderful way may I be there to see."

The Fresh bowed his acknowledgments, the ale was drank, and then all turned to see how the Frenchman was getting along.

He had fallen in such a clumsy way and hit his head with so much violence against the floor that the shock, even more than the blow he had received, stunned him.

But when Esparto knelt by his side and sprinkled the water upon his face, at the same time loosening his neck-tie, his senses soon returned to him.

Esparto had treated the stunned man with all the deft tenderness of a woman, and more than one of the bystanders remarked that the stranger was as good as a doctor.

The Frenchman rose to a sitting posture, and as he did so the Fresh observed to his companions:

"I knew the fellow was all right. A little clip like that never killed a man, or was even good for a long fit of sickness."

"Great Scott! I reckon it wasn't," the old mountain-man declared. "A leetle tap like that don't amount to nothing. If he had been laid out with a club, or knocked down with the butt-end of a gun, as I have been half a dozen times in my life, then he might talk."

"Yes, I was laid out myself with a heavy oak chair," Ringwood remarked. "And when a man gets a lick of that sort it is worth remembering."

Aided by the Cuban, De Charny rose to his feet.

He had not suffered any material injury, although his head felt a little queer, and the bruises on his face, disfigured by the Fresh of Frisco's iron-like knuckles, gave him considerable pain.

As the adventurer assumed a standing posture, and glared in sullen rage upon the man who had won such an easy triumph over him, the bystanders, who had crowded around, eager to watch the return of the Frenchman's senses, discreetly fell back, getting close to the walls so as to leave the center of the room open.

According to the usual custom in all such cases as this, now that the adventurer was on his feet again, it was his place to "go" for a weapon, and the crowd fell back, none of them being anxious to stop a bullet.

But the Frenchman had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

He could not have done so if he had wished, for he was not "heeled," to use the frontier parlance.

The Fresh was on the watch for such a movement, and fully prepared for it, but when the adventurer faced him he guessed that his opponent had all the fight he wanted at present.

"I am no fisticuff man," De Charny declared. "No English John Bull to fight like a ruffian! I am a gentleman, and if you are one you will not refuse to give me full satisfaction."

"Now you hit me where I live," the Fresh remarked. "I am a gentleman from Gentlemanville, and I hold myself in readiness to give you all the satisfaction you can possibly desire."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ADVENTURER'S DEMAND.

The crowd listened with eager attention, for they saw there was a good chance for some more "fun."

The Cubans looked at each other, and there was a decided expression of satisfaction in their dark eyes, but they were careful to school their faces so that no one could perceive that they were delighted with the way that matters were progressing.

"That is what I want, ze satisfaction due from one gentleman to another!" the Frenchman exclaimed.

"I am your man," the Fresh of Frisco replied. "And if you are not satisfied, I am ready to go on with you until you think you have got your money's worth."

"You will give me satisfaction, then?"

"That is what I said, and when you come to get well acquainted with me you will find that I am a man of my word."

"What weapons do you desire?" De Charny asked.

"It doesn't make a bit of difference to me," the Fresh replied.

"Do you dare to meet me with small-swords?" the Frenchman inquired, with an eagerness which could not be concealed.

"Small-swords, eh? and Jackson Blake surveyed the other, a peculiar smile upon his lips.

"That is what I said—small-swords—ze gentleman's weapon!" exclaimed the adventurer in a lofty way.

"I reckon you will not find many men in this region who are posted in that line," said the Fresh.

"Here, when we go into a little picnic of this kind, we usually choose fire-arms, revolvers or rifles, and once in a while, if the parties are very desperate, they go in to carve each other with bowie-knives."

"To my thinking, these are barbarous weapons!" the adventurer exclaimed in disgust.

"I am not a native of this land. I am a European."

"So I suspected," Jackson Blake observed.

"You are a Frenchman, if I mistake not."

"You are right. I am a son of the Republic!" the other declared in a grandiloquent way.

"You are a long way from home, and if you should have the ill-luck to get 'planted' here, your folks would never be apt to know what became of you," the Fresh remarked.

"I am a soldier of fortune, and all lands are alike to me," the adventurer replied. "I am the last of my race, and whether I meet my fate here or elsewhere, it matters not."

"Well, that is a good thing," Jackson Blake remarked in a reflective sort of way, "for it kinder takes a weight from a fellow's mind. If you had a large family, now, and a numerous circle of relatives, who would be apt to be inconsolable at your loss, then a man like myself, who is apt to be a little tender-hearted, might feel rather queer about going for you in a regular red-hot manner."

This bantering speech, although uttered in a perfectly sober and serious manner, excited the smiles of the listeners, and angered the Frenchman.

"Bah! I ask no mercy from you!" he exclaimed. "Neither will I give any, and if you have the courage to meet me, sword in hand, I have no doubt you will have all you can do to defend yourself, although I do not profess to be an expert swordsman; but it is a gentleman's weapon, and as I am a gentleman, I am sure I will be able to give a good account of myself; that is, if you dare to meet me with the sword; but it may be that you are only a fisticuff fighter, and that you will be afraid to expose your precious person to the naked steel," added the adventurer with a sneer.

"Oho!" cried the Fresh of Frisco, "I reckon you are trying to banter me into this fight! I suppose you think you have struck a soft thing! I reckon you must be a great chief in the sword line, or else you would not be so anxious for an encounter of this kind."

"In France every gentleman learns the use of the sword; it is part of a polite education," replied De Charny, proudly.

"I am afraid that my education has been rather neglected in that line; but I am willing to go you, all the same, for that is the kind of man I am!"

"You will meet me with swords, then?" De Charny asked?

"You bet!"

"Remember! it will be a duel to ze death!"

"That suits me, and just keep the fact in mind too, so that if I get you in a tight place you will not try to beg off."

"I beg!" cried the adventurer in mingled contempt and rage.

"That is what I said," replied the Fresh, in his cool, serious way. "And I give you fair warning that it will not do you any good, for since you have got me into this sword business I shall go for you in an extremely lively way. I shall do my best to make it interesting."

"You are far more likely to be the one to beg for mercy than I!" exclaimed the adventurer. "But I warn you in advance that I have made up my mind to kill you."

"You will let me know when you perform the operation, of course?" the Fresh suggested. "It would be awfully awkward for a man to be killed without knowing it."

This banter inflamed the Frenchman's rage still more, particularly as he saw that the bystanders were grinning at the pleasantry.

"Wait until you see the shining blades twist together like two silver snakes and you will not feel then in a jesting mood!" De Charny cried.

"Maybe not, but we can tell better when we come to that," Jackson Blake replied. "The only thing that worries me now though, is as to

where we are going to get the aforesaid shining blades of which you speak, for I reckon that small-swords are a scarce article in these diggings."

"Do not let that trouble you. I will undertake to find a pair," De Charny replied.

"All right, I am satisfied; and now, how about the time?"

"To-morrow."

"The place?"

"Any convenient one will suit me. I am a stranger and so not informed in regard to the neighborhood."

The landlord of the Hotel Mexico hastened to put in a word at this point.

"There is the bull-ring, where the bull-fights take place," he said. "I am the manager and shall be pleased to arrange with you gentlemen for the use of it. This affair is so public that it will not be possible for you to have your fight come off without a crowd being in attendance, and the rabble will be sure to be there, of course, and some annoyance may be caused by them. Now, by having your duel take place in the bull-ring, a small sum for admittance may be charged, and I would be willing to make a good arrangement with you gentlemen, say, allow you fifty per cent. of the receipts."

"A capital idea!" exclaimed the Fresh. "Turn the whole thing into a show, and fight for the gate-money—fight in an arena like the gladiators of ancient Rome, and let the victor pocket the gate-money after the fashion of the modern gladiators."

This scheme at once appealed to the mercenary instincts of the Frenchman, and as he was in great need of money, being certain that his opponent stood no chance, opposed to a master-of-arms like himself in a sword fight, he gave his approval to the scheme.

"I think it is an excellent idea, gentlemen!" the landlord declared.

The proprietor of the Hotel Mexico was a thrifty German Jew, Moses Goldberg by name, who had contrived to feather his nest pretty well since his advent in El Paso, for the hotel and bull-ring—where at regular intervals bull-fights took place—were both paying institutions.

"You could not find a better spot for a contest of this kind if you were to search all through Mexico," the landlord continued. "The spectators will be confined to the galleries and you will have all the arena for the fight, and you can both rest assured that there can be no interference with the contest, for our police arrangements for the purpose of keeping order are excellent."

"It will answer admirably, I am sure!" the adventurer declared. "And I for one am quite satisfied."

"I have no fault to find with the arrangement," the Fresh remarked. "And since the encounter has been arranged I suppose one might as well give the citizens of El Paso a treat as to allow the thing to waste its sweetness in the desert air."

"By the way," observed the Frenchman, abruptly. "I had forgotten one thing. We have not proceeded in this matter according to rule at all, for the principals, we have made the arrangements, when it should have been left to our seconds."

"Well, we have got there, all the same, so what difference does it make?" Jackson Blake inquired in his eminently practical way.

"Yes, but we must have seconds for the fight," the adventurer observed. "It is absolutely necessary, and as I am an entire stranger in El Paso, I shall have to ask two of you gentlemen to favor me by acting as my seconds."

The bystanders looked at each other, the two Cubans, in particular, exchanging inquiring glances and then, Gomes said:

"I for one am happy to place myself at your service, sir, if you care to avail yourself of my poor assistance."

"I shall be delighted," the Frenchman replied with a courtly bow.

"I will be glad to serve you also," said Esparo, "although I cannot boast of much experience in this line."

"I am charmed, I assure you, sir," and the adventurer made another bow.

"How about your seconds, Mr. Blake?" the landlord inquired.

"I reckon that I shall have to call upon Mr. Ringwood here, and California Joe to look after me," the Fresh replied.

Both men immediately expressed their willingness to take part in the matter.

And then, at the landlord's suggestion, the time for the contest was fixed for three in the afternoon; that being the hour when the people were accustomed to visit the bull-ring to see the bull-fight.

Moses Goldberg, with true Jewish thrift was looking after the gate-money.

"To-morrow then I will see you," the Frenchman remarked, and then he withdrew.

"He's gone for arnica and court-plaster," Old California Joe suggested, as he with the Fresh and Ringwood also took their departure.

Within an hour the news of the coming fight was widely known and El Paso was excited as it had not been for many a day.

CHAPTER XVII.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

JACKSON BLAKE and his pards mounted their steeds and set out for home.

The moon was shining brightly, and the ride down along the bank of the yellow Rio Grande was an extremely pleasant one.

After the three crossed the river and got well along on their homeward road, they fell into conversation regarding the events of the night.

Dave Ringwood was the first to refer to the subject.

"I say, pards, I have been thinking over this little matter to-night, and am considerably puzzled about it," he observed.

"What puzzles you?" the Fresh asked.

"Why, you and this Frenchman acted as if you were strangers to each other."

"That is correct; we were."

"And you never ran across him before?"

"Never!"

"What the deuce made him pick a quarrel with you then in such an outrageous way?" Ringwood exclaimed.

"That is a mystery."

"Durned if it ain't!" the old mountain-man exclaimed. "When the feller joggled yer elbow, I reckoned he was some galoot that you had had trouble with somewhar, and was trying to pick a fuss with you so as to git squar'; I reckoned, you see, that you had kinder upset his apple-cart onto the furst heat."

"That was my idea, too," Ringwood observed. "For the affront he put upon you was so deliberately executed that it looked as if the man had planned the thing beforehand."

"Oh, you kin bet yer gizzard on that!" Old California Joe declared.

"The whole affair is a mighty odd one," Jackson Blake remarked, reflectively. "And the more I think about the matter the greater becomes the difficulty in deciding why the man acted as he did."

"Of course, the moment my elbow was joggled, I jumped at once to the conclusion that it had been purposely done, for there was plenty of room at the bar. If there had been a crowd, then there might have been some excuse for the fellow, but not as it was; and when I turned, I expected to see some stranger—possibly with more liquor on board than was good for him—who had come to El Paso with the idea of running the town, and pitched upon me as a good man with whom to commence operations."

"Oh, no, this fellow was not on that game," said Ringwood.

"So I discovered the moment I got a look at him, but he was eager for a fight all the same though."

"An' I reckon he got it, too, red-hot!" chuckled the old scout.

"Yes, I do not think he anticipated being climbed quite so quickly," the Fresh remarked. "And most certainly he was astonished at the way the job was performed."

"He hadn't any reason to complain that he did not get his money's worth," Dave Ringwood observed, dryly.

"Yes, yes, he got full measure, heaped full an' a-runnin' over, and you would be safe in betting a heap of money on it too," Old California Joe declared.

"As you say, Ringwood, it looked as if it was a put-up job, and as the man was a stranger, the inference seems plain that somebody set him on to attack me."

"Yes, that seems probable, for the man was not drunk, neither was he one of the gay and festive roosters who delight to pick a quarrel with any stranger they run across for the purpose of proving that they are big chiefs, but if he was set on to attack you who is the party engineering the job?"

"Now you are asking a question which is not easily answered," the Fresh rejoined.

"In my mind there is no doubt that the fellow was instigated to attack me by some one, but as to who that party is I am completely in the dark."

"You hain't had a mite of trouble for some time, 'cept with that superintendent, Hounia," the old scout remarked.

"That is true, and the moment I saw that this Frenchman was bent upon making an attack upon me I thought of him, but now that I come to think of the matter I can hardly bring myself to believe that he can beat the bottom of the affair."

"No, it seems to me that it is a cut above him," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Oh, yes, decidedly," the Fresh assented. "If he had hired a man to attack me, he would have been apt to pick out some common ruffian, who would have gone in to lay me out in the regular way."

"How 'bout these Parrals?" inquired Old California Joe shrewdly. "Do you s'pose they had any finger in the pie? You kinder worried them when you fu'st came to El Paso, and, mebbe, they have been laying the thing up ag'in' yer?"

"No, I do not think that either the alcalde or his brother, the captain of police, are interested in this matter," Jackson Blake replied.

"They took pains to send me word some time

ago that they bore no malice, and were willing to call the thing square."

"The fact is, you got so much the best of the fight when they attacked you, they were not anxious to have another taste of your quality," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"That is about the size of it," the Fresh replied. "Now then, who is the party at the back of the Frenchman? If I had not heard to-day that Manuel Escobedo and his sister were dead, I should immediately jump to the conclusion that one of them had something to do with the attack."

"I heard that they were dead too—died in Cuba," Ringwood remarked.

"Yes, so the story goes."

"Mebbe it is all a yarn got up to throw you off yer guard," Old California Joe suggested.

"I thought of that," the Fresh answered. "Such a game has been played many a time. The report of their deaths would be apt to render me careless, so they would reason, and then they would have a better chance to get at me."

"It looks as if there might be something in that idea," Dave Ringwood observed thoughtfully.

"Sure as you're born!" declared the old scout.

"Well, as far as I can see, whoever planned the job has used considerable headwork," the Fresh remarked. "That is, if I am correct in my assumption that there is a scheme on foot to damage me."

"It certainly looks like it," Ringwood observed.

"No mistake 'bout that!" exclaimed Old California Joe, "'cos that French galoot went clear out of his way to pick a fuss with you."

"That is certain," Jackson Blake assented.

"Now to figure the thing right out. The man picked a quarrel with me without any reason. He was not a bully spoiling for a fight, and I do not think he contemplated having a personal encounter with me, but the prompt way in which I resented his affront provoked him into an attack. But that was not his game, though. The point for which he was working was to get me to meet him in a duel with swords."

"Yes, that seems likely, for that is what he came to as soon as he could," Ringwood observed.

"And that is where the headwork of the scheme comes in," the Fresh remarked.

"Whoever put up the job knew that I was a handy man with ordinary weapons, such as are in use along the Rio Grande, and that they would have to look a long time before they would be apt to find a man who could get the best of me with either knives, revolvers or rifles, but with an odd weapon like a sword the chances were big that I might be taken at a disadvantage."

The others nodded.

"I have met men like this Frenchman before," the Fresh continued, "so the breed is not unknown to me. I remember just such a fellow coming to a mining-camp in Southern California, where I hung out for a while. It was a mystery to everybody how such a man ever happened to come up in the foot-hills, for he was about the last man in the world who would be apt to get along, being a little, slender fellow, not fit for hard work, and all he could do was to teach French and dancing."

"I should reckon that there was not many men in the average mining-camp who would care to go in for either of those things," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Well, it must be a very small camp indeed, not to hold some eccentric individuals," the Fresh replied. "And even in this place of which I speak, the Professor, as we all called him, managed to get enough pupils to enable him to keep body and soul together. In fact, I myself went three dollars a week on him for quite a time, for a man mixing in the society that I did needed the polish that a knowledge of the French tongue and the art of dancing gave."

"Ob, yes, thar must have been a heap of good society in such a mining-camp as you tell us!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"Well, the people there were all blue-blooded ducks if you could believed their yarns of how well fixed they had once been. Anyhow, there were three of us that chipped and kept the Frenchman alive, and after a while we found out what bad brought him down that way: it was the old story of the secret mine; but, as it usually pans out, the mine was so durned secret that nobody was ever able to find it."

"The Frenchman was half-starved when he struck the camp, and so was quite weak and humble, but after he began to pick up, he grew quarrelsome. He had a pair of swords with him and said he was a terror as a swordsman, so one of the smart Alecks of the camp took him up one night, and the result was that when the fight took place next day the Frenchman played with his man for a while and then laid him out without any trouble."

"Now this gave me an idea; I was a cardsharp, just then, and time used to hang heavy on my hands during the day, as there was no business until night, so I got the Frenchman to give me fencing lessons, and as both of us had nothing to do, we used to practice two or three

hours a day, and I got so I could handle a sword very well."

"Aha, you will be able to beat this fellow at his own game then?" Dave Ringwood exclaimed.

"Oh, no, that was some fifteen years ago and I am all out of practice—regularly rusty, you know, and if I should attempt to put my skill against the Frenchman's, he would settle me measure; but thanks to the lessons I received I know enough to understand that I cannot hope to get the best of the fight unless I come some game upon my man, and that is just the riddle I am going to try."

"How about those two foreign-looking chaps who are to second the Frenchman?" Raymond inquired.

"I reckon that both of them will bear watching, for I think they are in league with the fellow," Blake answered. "But deep as the game is I think I can beat it!"

The Fresh was confident as usual.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE BULL-RING.

The announcement of the duel between the stranger and the Fresh of 'Frisco created more talk than anything which had happened in the old town of El Paso for many a day, and, as the Cubans had anticipated, the sports of the city were decidedly inclined to favor Jackson Blake in the betting.

They knew what the Fresh could do, and though they had never seen him encounter a foe with the sword, yet they felt sure he was a master-hand with the weapon or else he would not have consented to fight with it.

"There are no flies on the Fresh of 'Frisco, you bet!" was the emphatic declaration of one of the leading sharps of the town.

So, when it came to betting upon the result the Fresh was the favorite at the odds of two to one.

The Cubans called upon the alcalde and found him busily engaged in discussing with the chief of police the chances of the coming duel.

"Aha!" exclaimed the alcalde, as the visitors entered, "you are just the men we wanted to see. We have been talking about this fight, and since you are mixed up in it, you can post us in regard to the chances."

"Oh, yes, the Frenchman is our tool and this is our first blow at Jackson Blake," Gomes remarked, as he and his companion helped themselves to seats.

The Mexicans were amazed at this intelligence, and so expressed themselves.

Then Gomes explained how they had happened to meet with the adventurer; related all the particulars of their interview with him and the agreement to which they had come.

The alcalde and the captain of police listened with the utmost attention, and at the close of the recital expressed their satisfaction.

"From such a trap it does not appear possible that the American can escape," the alcalde remarked.

"And the best of the matter is that neither he nor his friends seemed to have any suspicion that he has been tricked into a foolish agreement," the chief of police observed.

"The man's overweening confidence will be his ruin," Gomes declared.

"Most certainly he does not seem to know what he is doing," the alcalde remarked. "But these Americans are a foolhardy race. Of course he knows nothing of the sword, although undoubtedly expert with the weapons in common use in this section, but he has no fears in regard to the result; that is because he knows nothing about it, and, in fact, there are few Americans who are skilled swordsmen. It is a weapon with which they are not familiar, and that is the reason why this madman of a Blake is ready to rush so heedlessly into this contest. If he had any knowledge of the subject it would teach him that it is a dangerous thing to face a Frenchman in a sword encounter, for it is a well-known fact that the French are a race of swordsmen."

"My brother and myself are posted in regard to this matter," the captain of police explained. "At one time we were officers in the Mexican army, and of course learned how to use a sword, although neither one of us can boast of being skillful enough to meet a regular professional fencer like this Frenchman, and, most certainly, for my part, I would not hold a man to be a coward if he avoided such a contest, for it would simply be throwing one's life away."

"That is my opinion also," the alcalde remarked. "A man would be a fool to engage in a contest where all the advantage is on his opponent's side."

"That goes without saying," Gomes observed. "This man Blake is undoubtedly a shrewd fellow, and prides himself upon his sharpness, but in this case he has fallen into a trap which will undoubtedly cost him his life."

"There is a chance for a speculation," the alcalde remarked; "for about all the sports of the town are betting heavily upon the American."

"Yes; it is the common belief that he is invincible," the chief of police added.

"I understand that he has been remarkably successful in all the encounters in which he has

been engaged since he came to El Paso," Esparto remarked.

"That is undoubtedly a fact, and that is the reason why the sports have made him a favorite in the betting," the alcalde observed. "You see, the majority of them know nothing at all about a sword-fight, and so are not competent to calculate the chances. Now we, being well-posted, have the inside track, so to speak, and if we invest our money carefully we ought to be able to make a good thing out of this fight."

The rest agreed to this, and after a few more unimportant words were exchanged, the party sallied forth, intent upon picking up a good round sum by betting upon the coming fight.

The four had no difficulty, whatever, in betting all the money that they cared to wager, for the sporting men of El Paso, having perfect faith that the Fresh would prove the victor in the sword-fight, were eager and anxious to back their opinions with the "solid stuff," as a Westerner would say.

The old town of El Paso could boast of as many sports as any other in Mexico, in proportion to its population, the people generally delighted in amusements, and the bull-ring was always well-patronized whenever it was opened, but on this particular afternoon of which we write the place was crowded.

A bull-fight, when it was known that the bulls were wild, savage beasts, and there was a chance that some of the performers might come to grief, was sure to attract a crowd, and what bull fight could compare with a duel to the death between humans?

The attraction appealed powerfully to the citizens of the old Mexican town, and when the hour for the contest arrived, the auditorium of the bull-ring was crowded.

El Paso had turned out *en masse* to witness the rare show.

And not only the inhabitants of the town were present, but people had come in from the surrounding country, twenty or thirty miles away even, to witness the fight, for the news of the encounter spread like wild-fire.

It had been carried down the Rio Grande to the neighborhood where the Fresh had his ranch, and a large delegation of his neighbors had come up to see the contest.

In Mexico, as in Spain, it is considered perfectly proper for ladies to grace the bull-ring with their presence, and in the party who came up the Rio Grande were half a dozen ladies, and among them were the heiress of Escobedo, Margaret, and her companion, the lively Pauline.

Margaret had been persuaded to take the trip by the ladies who resided on the next ranch.

These being members of one of the old families, who prided themselves upon their pure Spanish descent, were in the habit of going to the bull-fights, just as their ancestors had always done, and did not think there was anything out of the way in their attending this modern gladiatorial encounter.

But Margaret Escobedo had not been brought up to look at the matter in this light, and most certainly she would not have yielded to the pressing solicitation of her Mexican friends if Jackson Blake had not been interested in the matter.

When she learned, though, that the Fresh was to be one of the principals in the affair, she felt as if she could not stay away, and so she accepted the invitation.

In this course she was encouraged by her friend, for though Miss Melville, when she first heard of the affair, had protested that it was "perfectly horrid" to think of going to see two men try to kill each other, yet her morbid curiosity was soon excited and she really became eager to make one of the party.

Of course, had it not been for the interest which the girls took in the Fresh of 'Frisco, neither one would have dreamed of going.

The two Cubans were standing near the entrance when the party from down the river entered the inclosure, and they immediately noticed the presence of Margaret Escobedo.

The heiress was pale, and seemed ill at ease, and as she entered Gomes called the attention of his companions to her, saying:

"There is Margaret Escobedo; I am rather astonished at it, for she has a horror of bull-fights and kindred sports, which she considers to be barbarous and bloody."

"The Fresh of 'Frisco is the attraction which draws her here," Esparto answered. "Otherwise you may be sure she would not come."

"Is she in love with the fellow, then?" Gomes asked, a scowl darkening his face.

"No doubt of it! Do you not see that she looks pale and anxious?" the other replied.

"That is true. Well, unless the Frenchman is a braggart, and boasts a skill which he does not possess, she comes to see the American die!" Gomes exclaimed with a fierce accent.

"There is little doubt in regard to the result, I think," the other remarked. "Although all El Paso appears to consider that the Frenchman stands no chance at all, but that is because they know what Blake can do while the other man is a stranger."

"Yes, but they will probably be considerably astonished within five minutes after the affair begins."

Then Gomes consulted his watch and finding that it was near the appointed time he, with his companion, repaired to one of the dressing-rooms, where they found the Frenchman enjoying a cigar.

"Aha, my friends, is it near the hour?" he asked.

"It wants but ten minutes to the time," Gomes replied.

"I am glad of it for I am getting tired of waiting. I am anxious to get at my man and finish as soon as possible."

"You feel certain that you will be able to conquer him?" Esparto asked.

The adventurer smiled disdainfully and shrugged his shoulders like a true Gaul.

"It would be very strange indeed if a man like myself, one of the first swordsmen in Europe, should come to an obscure hole like El Paso, in the wilds of the New World, and there meet a master," he remarked.

"Well, this Blake is a good man and it would be well not to hold him too cheaply," Gomes continued.

"Rest content, my brave, I shall not throw any opportunities away."

At this point the landlord of the Hotel Mexico, Moses Goldberg, who acted as master of ceremonies, entered the room.

"It lacks but a few minutes of the appointed time," he said, "and the seconds of the Americans are already in the ring."

CHAPTER XIX.

SWORD IN HAND.

"WE are all ready and will not keep them waiting!" the adventurer exclaimed. "There are the weapons," and the Frenchman pointed to a table upon which were two pair of swords. They were the regulation "small-swords," such as are used by the duelists of the Old World.

"As you will perceive, gentlemen, they are all as alike as two peas, and a man would be safe in choosing one of them with his eyes blinded," De Charny continued.

This was true enough, for the swords were exactly alike, as far as any one could see.

"Let us get on with the business as soon as possible," said Goldberg, "for the audience is growing impatient."

The party then proceeded to the ring, the Cubans bearing the swords, and the adventurer strutted along with the air of a man who thought himself to be of great importance.

Ringwood and Old California Joe stood in the center of the bull-ring, and the Fresh was seated in a chair on one side near the entrance where the bulls were wont to make their *entree* into the ring.

On the other side of the ring near the door of the dressing-room from which the Frenchman and his party came, was another chair, and this De Charny took, while his seconds advanced to the middle of the ring to confer with the Americans, the master of ceremonies keeping them company.

The audience had been busily engaged in discussing the chances of the coming fight; many of them wondering why the Frenchman was not visible, and quite a number had openly expressed the apprehension that it might be possible the adventurer had shown the white feather at the last moment and they were to be cheated out of their amusement. Therefore, when the Frenchman made his appearance, a loud hum of satisfaction rose on the air, and then the auditorium became still, each spectator anxious not to allow any of the exhibition to escape notice, just as in a theater the audience settle down in their seats and become quiet upon the rising of the curtain.

The Cubans saluted the Americans politely, and Dave Ringwood and Old California Joe were particular to return the salutation with equal ceremony.

"Here are the swords," said Gomes. "As you will observe they are all alike; there is not a particle of difference between them as far as I can see."

And he held out the swords for inspection.

Dave Ringwood was a suspicious man by nature and his experience, too, had taught him that it was not safe to put trust in the average man in a case of this kind, so he examined the swords in the most careful manner. He was not an expert in regard to swords; yet, as far as he could see, no one of the weapons was better than the others.

"This will answer, I reckon," he said, selecting one of the swords. "And now in regard to the terms of the fight?"

"It is to be a duel to the death," Gomes replied. "My principal has been insulted and outraged in so gross a manner that the death of the man who has been guilty of the offense alone can satisfy him."

"That is all right," Ringwood rejoined. "I reckon that our side is satisfied to let it go at that."

"Oh, yes, you kin bet yer bottom dollar that we are not kicking!" Old California Joe cried.

"The bout is to continue until blood is drawn, then a wait of five minutes will be allowed."

"Kinder divided up into beats, so to speak," the old mountain-man remarked.

"More like the rounds of a prize-fight," Ring-

wood suggested. "Well, that is all right. Fight until blood is drawn, then five minutes' rest before the contest is renewed. That is understood. Anything else?"

"That is all," the Cuban replied.

"I suppose I had better make known the conditions of the fight to the audience," the hotel-keeper remarked.

The seconds nodded assent to this.

"If I did not there might be some dissatisfaction," Goldberg added.

"How 'bout the gate-money?" asked Old California Joe, with a keen eye to business.

"Fifty per cent. of that I take for the use of the building, and the rest goes to the victor in the fight," the landlord answered.

"That is all square!" the old scoundrel exclaimed.

"Go ahead with your explanation, so we can get down to business, Goldberg," said Ringwood.

The hotel-keeper faced the audience, held up his hand to attract their attention—which was needless, for every eye was fixed upon him—then made known the terms of the fight.

There was a burst of applause when the explanation was concluded, not that the amusement-seekers cared a jot about the rules of the contest, but they were eager for the fight to begin, and understood that their appetite would soon be gratified.

As soon as the applause died away, a stalwart man, with a long, brown beard, who occupied a front seat in the center of the semicircle arose. Being of a commanding figure, and occupying a prominent position, all eyes were attracted to him.

The gentleman was as well-known as any citizen who dwelt in El Paso, being the owner of the largest gaming establishment that the town had ever known.

The readers of the romance relating the adventures of Jackson Blake in the neighborhood of the old Mexican city, entitled, "The Fresh on the Rio Grande," will probably remember Doc Moses, the faro king, and it was this prominent sharp who, by rising in his place, had attracted the attention of all the audience.

"Gentlemen, I rise to remark that I believe Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, is going to win this game!" he exclaimed. "And as money talks in a case of this kind a heap sight louder than words, I will announce that I am prepared to back my opinions with the solid stuff!"

At this point Doc Moses drew a big roll of bills from his pocket, and flourished them in the air.

"Now then, gentlemen, any of you that are anxious to bet against the Fresh of 'Frisco, will have a chance."

"Just step up to the captain's office as soon as possible, please!" the sport continued. "I am prepared to give odds—I will go two to one on Jackson Blake!"

The members of the audience looked at each other, but no one stirred to accept the banter.

The brown-bearded sport waited for a few moments, looking around him in an inquiring way, and then said:

"I have made a few small bets on this contest, but I have not invested anything like the money that I should like to have on it, and so I take this public method of making known my wants."

Then the sport glanced around again, but not a man in the audience evinced any idea of taking up the defiance.

"Oh, come, fellow-citizens!" cried Doc Moses; "don't be so backward in coming forward! Hyer I am, and hyer's my money—and money talks every time, you bet! And if two to one is not a big enough inducement for you, hang me if I don't raise the ante! I will make it three to one, and go any man in hundreds, too. Three hundred to one hundred that Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, wins this game! Now, don't all speak at once!"

But though many of the men present nodded their heads as much as to say that they considered the offer a tempting one, yet no one accepted it.

There had been considerable betting on the result of the contest, for when such large odds as two to one were offered there were quite a number of reckless sports who were willing to risk small sums, for even though they believed that the Fresh was the best man, yet they argued that the chapter of accidents might give the victory to the stranger, and so they invested.

But these men had bet all the money that they cared to risk, and Doc Moses's offer met with no response.

"Well, well, I am sorry that none of the gentlemen present have the saud to accept my challenge," the old sport remarked. "And yet, since this match was on, I have heard some pretty loud talk, but evidently the men who were so free with their chin-music are not disposed to be equally so with their cash."

And with this sarcastic remark, Doc Moses took his seat.

The episode excited the Frenchman's anger; the idea that the cool sport should think so meanly of his abilities as to be willing to bet two to one upon his antagonist was extremely galling, and when the sport, finding that there

was no response to his first offer, expressed his willingness to bet three to one, De Charny could hardly restrain himself.

"Is the man a fool?" he exclaimed, to the two Cubans who at the moment were helping him to prepare for the encounter.

"What does he take me for?" he continued, full of wrath. "Am I a boy who has never had a sword in his hand that he is so certain I will be vanquished in the fight?"

"Oh, he is trying the favorite game of these Americans," Gomes remarked. "He is only bluffing, as they call it, and if any one should be bold enough to take him up the chances are great that he would not be inclined to risk much money, if he did not find some way to creep out of the wager altogether."

"Why do you not take him up?" the Frenchman asked.

"Because I have already invested all the money I can spare," Gomes replied. "Both Esparo and myself have put out every dollar that we could rake together on you."

"Three to one!" exclaimed the adventurer, red with rage. "Ahal! wait until we cross swords and I will soon show this sport who is so free with his money that he never made a bigger mistake in his life than when he dared to lay odds against me!"

By this time the duelists were prepared for the encounter.

They had removed their outer garments, their breasts only being covered by their shirts.

Each had rolled up the right-hand shirt-sleeve and knotted a handkerchief tightly around their waists.

Sword in hand the pair advanced to the center of the ring and confronted each other.

The audience became as still as death.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CONTEST.

ALTHOUGH the Frenchman was a well-made fellow, yet he was not to be compared in muscular development with Jackson Blake, and he was evidently astonished by the appearance of the sport when he saw him stripped for the fight.

But in a sword contest muscular development and superior strength are not so important as in a boxing match, and therefore, though the adventurer was amazed by the discovery that his opponent was as well-made a man as his eyes had ever looked upon, yet he was not impressed with the slightest fear in regard to the result of the duel.

He was nettled by the contemptuous manner in which the sports of El Paso had treated him.

The idea that he, one of the first swordsmen in Europe, opposed to a dull brute of an American, who in all probability never had a sword in his hand before, should go a-begging in the betting, no one being willing to venture one dollar against three on him was, in his opinion, simply outrageous.

Confident then in his own skill—feeling sure that his adversary stood no chance whatever, he resolved to show these men of El Paso, who had so poor an opinion of him, a display of swordsmanship such as they had never witnessed before.

He determined to play with his antagonist for a while as a cat plays with a mouse.

Under ordinary circumstances it was his custom in an affair of this kind to "finish" his man as soon as possible—a "parade" and then a fatal thrust as quickly as the opportunity came.

If his opponent had been a man with a fair knowledge of the fencer's art the Frenchman would have hesitated about trying any nonsense with him, but as it was, De Charny did not have any fear of the "brute American," as he contemptuously termed the Fresh of 'Frisco.

The adventurer had his plan of operations all formed as he advanced to cross swords with his opponent.

With a brilliant "flourish" he intended to confuse his antagonist, then he proposed to "pink" him in the shoulder, just enough to draw blood, but not so severely as to disable the American.

After this he would wound him in the sword-arm—just scratch the skin with the point of his blade, as though it was the claw of a gigantic cat.

By this time he calculated that his antagonist would either be wrought up to a state of fury, or else plunged into despair, realizing that he stood no chance to win, then he would bring the affair to an end with a thrust, which would send the American to his long home without ceremony.

"These savages, who are afraid to bet on me, have paid their money to witness the exhibition and I will see that they get the worth of their cash," the Frenchman muttered between his teeth as he advanced to the center of the bull-ring.

The pair paused when they were within six feet of each other and bowed ceremoniously.

"Sir American, you have insulted me in the grossest manner!" exclaimed the adventurer in tones so loud that every word could be distinctly heard by all the audience.

"Never in all my life have I suffered so gross

an outrage, and I give you fair warning that I intend to have your heart's blood to wipe out the disgrace!"

"That is your say-so, but it is not mine!" the Fresh of 'Frisco retorted. "Now, as you are a stranger to this section I don't want you to make any mistake about this matter. You may think you are going to have a walk-over, but in such a picnic as this it is never safe to count your chickens until they are hatched." That is an old saying, and a mighty true one. Before we get through with this little affair you may discover that 'Jack is as good as his master,' and I want you to distinctly understand that you have not got so sure a thing as you seem to think."

This bold defiance angered the Frenchman still more.

"Be warned!" De Charny cried in a voice full of rage, "I do not intend to show you any mercy!"

"Oh, come down to business and talk no more!" Jackson Blake exclaimed. "You are not going to win this fight with words, and you are just wasting your breath."

"En garde!" cried the adventurer, throwing himself into position.

The shining blades crossed, twined around each other like a pair of silver serpents, and every eye in the audience was fixed upon the pair.

Just for a moment the steels twined around each other, and then, before the Frenchman had a chance to make the movement which he had in anticipation, the Californian played a trick upon him, the like of which no fencer was ever taught.

The Fresh, with a powerful movement, closed with his antagonist, and pressing his blade firmly against the adventurer's steel, forced the other's sword against his body, and with the point of his own blade ripped open the cheek of the Frenchman, then jumped back out of distance, laughing in the face of his antagonist.

"First blood!" sung out Old California Joe, delighted at the successful accomplishment of the trick.

"Five minutes' breathing time, gentlemen!" proclaimed the master of ceremonies.

The Frenchman was furious—he fairly turned white with rage as he put his hand to his cheek and pressed it upon the ugly scratch which the blade of the Californian had made, while a long-drawn "Ah!" ascended on the air from the lips of the audience.

"What kind of sword-play do you call that?" the adventurer cried, really trembling with rage as he spoke.

"That is called the 'Git thar stroke,'" the Fresh replied in his cool way.

"It is barbarous!" cried De Charny indignantly.

"Exactly, considerable of the barbar about it, if it cannot lay claim to the ous," rejoined the other.

"Such a way to fight was never heard of!" the Frenchman declared.

"What do you know about it, anyway?" Jackson Blake questioned.

"What do I know about it? Am I not one of the first swordsmen in Europe?"

"You are?"

"Yes, there are not three men in the world whom I am willing to acknowledge as my masters!"

"The deuce you say?"

"It is the truth!"

"Well, you have roped me into a nice trap then!" the Fresh declared. "What sort of a chance then do I stand against you, I should like to know?"

"None at all!" hissed the Frenchman savagely. "And I am going to kill you with as little mercy as though you were a snake crawling in the grass at my feet!"

"If you can!" cried the Fresh of 'Frisco. "Don't forget to put that in, always! If you can, because sometimes it is not as easy to do these tricks as it is at others."

"Now, then, gentle stranger, it strikes me that you have put up the worst kind of a job on me. You are, according to your own statement, a master of the sword while it is a weapon which I know but little about, and so, under the circumstances, I think I am justified in going at you any way I can; so just keep on the lookout and you have no right to growl if I don't fight according to the rules of a fencing-school!"

"Time!" exclaimed the master of ceremonies at this point.

Again the antagonists advanced, sword in hand.

This time the Frenchman, furious with rage at the advantage which his opponent had gained in the first bout, made up his mind to bring the affair to an end as soon as possible.

He would kill the American at the first opportunity.

The adventurer thought no more of "showing off"—no longer was he anxious to display his skill as a swordsman, all he cared for now was to slay his antagonist.

Again the shining blades crossed, but hardly had they turned when the Fresh jumped back, and then rushed at his opponent, striking at his

head, using the small-sword as though it was a saber.

With the cavalry weapons the Californian was familiar, although he could not boast of much skill with the foil, and in this he possessed a decided advantage over his antagonist, who knew nothing at all about the saber.

So fierce was the attack, that De Charny had all he could do to parry the blows, and found no opportunity to thrust.

First on one side and then on the other the Fresh of 'Frisco pressed him.

Twice the agile-footed Californian broke through the guard of the Frenchman, and his steel wounded the adventurer.

De Charny's breath began to come quick and hard.

In all his experience as a swordsman, he had never been so fiercely attacked, or had his strength and endurance put to so rude a test.

He felt that his strength was beginning to fail him, and, in desperation, endeavored to get a chance to thrust at his foe.

The attempt cost him dear, for Jackson Blake parried the stroke so vigorously that the adventurer's blade was beaten to one side—the muscle of his sword-arm being tired from the unusual efforts which they had been forced to make—the Fresh saw his opportunity, and quickly lunging, sent his blade through the shoulder of the Frenchman.

By this time, about all the audience was on their feet, wildly excited over the contest, and a tremendous shout went up when the Fresh made his successful thrust.

The Frenchman staggered back, threw up his arms and then sank to the ground.

The fight was ended.

Again the audience yelled, and, to add to the excitement, some half a dozen ladies in the audience fainted, the heiress of Escobedo being among them, thus making a scene of wild confusion.

The ladies were removed by their friends, the wounded man carried to one of the dressing-rooms, and the audience dispersed, satisfied that they had got their money's worth.

It was equal to a first-class bull-fight, all declared.

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

IT was the two Cubans and the master of ceremonies who bore the wounded Frenchman to the dressing-room, and the doctor that was usually employed to care for the bull-fighters who happened to be injured in the games, hastened to see what he could do for the discomfited duelist.

After an examination the medical gentleman announced that though the wound was a severe one, yet it was not mortal, and in his opinion there was no doubt the Frenchman would recover.

And then, having a keen eye for business, the doctor inquired who would be responsible for the bill in case he took charge of the case.

"Well, the gentleman is an entire stranger to me," the landlord remarked. "He is stopping at my hotel, but I know very little about him."

"He is a stranger to us also," Gomes remarked as the landlord and the doctor turned an inquiring eye upon him and his companion. "I should imagine though, from what little I know of him that he is not over-flush with wealth, but as far as your bill goes, doctor, do not allow that to trouble you, for I will attend to it, and, landlord, see that he wants for nothing and I will stand the expense."

"Upon my word, sir, you are extremely liberal!" the doctor exclaimed, with a low bow, profoundly impressed by the generous offer.

"I will see that he has everything he wants!" Goldberg declared.

The wounded man had been placed upon a rude couch in the room which had been expressly provided for use in cases of this kind, and he was apparently in a swoon; in reality, though, he had come out of the stupor into which he had fallen immediately after receiving his wound, and so was able to overhear the conversation.

Now, the adventurer was a man of the world—had traveled much in his time, and seen a deal of life, and the generosity of the Cuban, instead of arousing his gratitude, awakened his suspicion.

"Too generous—too generous by half," he muttered between his teeth. "What game is the man up to—what service does he desire at my hands after I get over this cursed sword-thrust?"

By this speech it will be seen that the Frenchman was an extremely suspicious gentleman.

As the doctor and the landlord now felt easy in regard to their bills they hastened to get the wounded man to more comfortable quarters than he now enjoyed.

Four of the bull-ring attendants were summoned, and the Frenchman, couch and all was transported to the Hotel Mexico.

There the landlord had a comfortable room prepared for him, and after the wounded man was put to bed in it, the doctor proceeded to dress his wound, the Cubans and the landlord standing by and watching the operation with great interest.

"Upon my life, my friend, you have had an

extremely narrow escape!" the doctor exclaimed, after he had made a careful examination of the Frenchman's hurt.

"Oh, yes. I know that as well as you," growled the adventurer, evidently in an extremely bad humor.

"If his blade had gone two inches more to the left and an inch lower down, all the doctors in this world would not have been able to do you any good," the medical man observed, with a solemn wag of the head.

"Yes, yes! You must tell me something that I don't know, if you want to astonish me," the wounded man exclaimed, testily.

"You must not make the mistake of taking me for a novice," he continued. "This is not the first time that I have stood, sword in hand, before an opponent, and not the first time, either, that I have been stretched on my back by a dexterous sword-thrust; so I am about as good a judge in regard to such matters as any doctor in Christendom."

"Now, my dear sir, you must be patient and restrain yourself from giving way to any fits of temper, or I will not be answerable for the consequences," the doctor protested.

"Oh, that is all right," returned the wounded man. "Don't fear that I will hurt myself by growling. That is all I can do—the only consolation left me after my miserable display today." And the tone in which the adventurer spoke showed how deeply his defeat had sunk into his heart.

"Well, well, my dear sir, you are not the first man that in this city of El Paso has attempted to cut the comb of this American fighting-cock and lived to regret the trial," the doctor remarked.

"That is true enough," the landlord added. "It is no disgrace for any man to be conquered by this American, for since he came to the banks of the Rio Grande he has met some of the best men in this section, and has succeeded in getting away with all of them."

"Oh, he is a regular North American devil! There is no doubt about that!" the doctor exclaimed.

"Yes, I understood that he was looked upon as being an extra good man," the Frenchman remarked. "But I had no fears in regard to meeting him for I knew that it could not be possible that he was any such swordsman as I am and therefore I anticipated an easy victory."

"Ah, my dear sir, experience has taught me that a man never knows how to take these wild North Americans!" the doctor exclaimed. "Why I have had them under my care when there was not one chance in a hundred that they would recover, and yet they have managed to pull through. One case in particular I remember; this old mountain-man—old California Joe as he is called—he was sick with the break-bone fever—not a hope for his life to my thinking, but I prescribed for him—he recovered; I told him that I knew my medicines would save him if anything would; then the North American brute laughed in my face and said that he hadn't taken a drop of my nasty stuff, but had dosed himself with whisky in which pine burrs had been steeped; a barbarous decoction which would have killed anybody but one of these savages."

"It is true; I have known of just such cases," the landlord asserted.

During the conversation the doctor had been attending to the wound, and it did not take him long to do all that could be done under the circumstances; then, when the task was completed, the doctor and landlord withdrew.

"Well, our carefully-planned scheme came to naught," Gomes remarked. He had taken a seat by the side of the bed upon which the Frenchman reclined, Esparto being seated a yard or so away.

"Yes, the fellow beat me, but such a duel was never seen before in this world!" the adventurer exclaimed. "I was made a complete laughing-stock of—the butt for the crowd! If such a thing had happened in Europe I would never have dared to show my head again. Like the ancient Roman, I should have been tempted to have fallen on my own sword!"

"Undoubtedly the peculiar manner in which this American fought perplexed you," Esparto remarked.

"Undoubtedly it did!" cried the Frenchman. "By my soul! I never saw anything like it before, and I doubt if anybody else ever did. The fellow by his mode of attack set at defiance all the rules of fence."

"But now that you are acquainted with the peculiar way in which he fights, do you not think that in a second encounter you would be able to get the best of him?" Gomes asked.

"I should surely think that you would succeed in turning the tables, and thus secure ample revenge for your defeat to-day," Esparto urged.

The Frenchman half-closed his eyes, a device on his part to conceal the peculiar look which he knew was coming into them. "Well, well, it is hard to tell," he said, slowly, speaking as though he was affected by the pain of his wound. "Now that I am acquainted with the man, and understand how he fights, there is no doubt that I could do better than I did to-day, but whether I could conquer him or not is a question."

"By all the fiends!" cried Gomes, "if I were you and had been triumphed over to-day as you have been by this American, I could find it in my heart to compass his death by foul means if I could not do so fairly."

"That is my mind too!" Esparto declared. "We Cubans are hot-blooded about such matters, and when we are wronged we care not how we get revenge so long as we obtain it!"

"That is right; I agree with you there," the Frenchman replied. "This scoundrel has triumphed over and disgraced me before a multitude and I should not be worthy the name of man if I did not hunger for revenge."

"Exactly! that is the way I should feel about the matter," Gomes declared with an approving nod.

"It is the way that every man should feel if he has blood and not water in his veins!" Esparto exclaimed.

"Oh, I will call him to an account, be sure of that," the adventurer remarked. "But I will own to you that he achieved so easy a victory over me that it has rendered me timid of meeting him with the sword again."

"You would be on your guard now against his tricks," Gomes suggested.

"And being on your guard, possibly, you would be able to give him a thrust which would close his account with this world," Esparto observed.

"I fear that with the sword I cannot hope to cope with him," the wounded man replied with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Select some other weapon then!" Gomes exclaimed. "And if you do not think you can secure revenge by a fair and open fight, why then make a secret attack upon him. We are your friends and will stand by you. You have been injured and we are anxious to see you avenge yourself."

"Yes, count on us to the death!" Esparto declared.

The Frenchman thanked the Cubans, and as he seemed to be growing tired, after a few more words, they withdrew.

The Frenchman looked after them with a peculiar expression upon his face.

"Oho!" he exclaimed, "am I selected for the role of the cat then to pull the chestnuts out of the fire? Upon my word I think I have burnt my fingers once already."

CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED MOVEMENT.

FOR quite a time the wounded adventurer remained silent, busy in meditation.

Now that his wound was dressed he felt decidedly better; in reality his hurt was not as severe as the doctor imagined, and as the Frenchman was a man with a fine constitution, and one who had always taken care of himself, the shock had not prostrated him as completely as it otherwise might have done.

"Yes, yes," he said at last, "I think I see the game now. I was a fool to allow these sharpers to deceive me so cleverly. It is odd too that I should have fallen into the trap in such a blind, stupid way, a man like myself, who has met cunning rogues of all degrees. These fellows though deceived me completely. They planned the matter so cleverly that I had no suspicion they were making a cat's-paw out of me, and that I was being used as a tool to wreak private vengeance. They have a grudge against this American, and not daring to face him themselves got me into this scheme, hoping that I would be able to do the work which they dared not attempt themselves.

"These Cubans are extremely generous gentlemen!" the Frenchman exclaimed, with a sneer. "They will pay my bills, although I am a stranger to them; but though I have not been of service to them in the past they hope I will be in the future. In fine, they desire me to play the part of a bravo—a hired assassin—and they think I will be base enough to murder the man whom I was not able to master in a fair and open fight.

"But they have made a mistake! I am no such man as that. I am bad enough, Heaven knows! but I have never yet descended so low as to play the role of an assassin. No, sooner than disgrace myself in that way I would beg my bread from door to door!"

"I hate these men of Spanish descent!" he exclaimed, with a sudden outbreak. "They are like the Italians, prone to strike at a man's back when they dare not face him!"

"Another thought comes in here; will not this precious pair seek to take vengeance upon me when they find that I am not willing to act the part which they have assigned me?"

"Yes, yes, not a doubt of it," the wounded man declared, after a few moments of meditation.

"They will turn against me in a moment, and probably seek to deal me some terrible blow. I must look out for myself."

Again the Frenchman fell into profound meditation, which continued until interrupted by the entrance of one of the hotel servants, who had been instructed to look in upon the wounded man every now and then for the purpose of seeing if he wished anything.

The man was a negro with a sly, cunning face, and after the Frenchman took a good look at him he decided that he was just the kind of fellow who could be depended upon to do any job where craft and keenness were required, provided he was well paid for it.

"Is dar anything you want, sah?" the negro inquired.

With the forethought which is so necessary to the man who leads the life of an adventurer, the Frenchman had taken care to have his wallet placed under his pillow, so that he was not without funds, for the sum which he had received from the Cuban had not been all expended; in fact he had barely touched it, although he had been strongly tempted to risk it in betting on the result of the fight.

"Well, let me see," replied De Charny, fixing his keen eyes full on the face of the black. "What is your name?" he asked, abruptly.

"Domingo, sah."

"Are you a man who can be trusted, provided you are paid enough?"

The negro displayed his ivories in a prodigious grin.

"Yes, sah, I reckon I is!" he replied. "When you say dat, sah, I reckon you hit me whar I lib!"

"Well, I want a little service performed, and if you will undertake the task, I will give you a couple of ounces."

"All right, sah; I reckon I will be glad to do it."

"You know this Mr. Blake—the gentleman with whom I fought to-day?"

"Yes, sah; I was dar and seen de skirmish."

"I want to see Mr. Blake, and I don't want to have anybody know anything about it. Do you think you could contrive to see Mr. Blake and get him to come to my room here and arrange it so that his visit will not be known?"

"Oh, yes, sah!" the black declared, full of confidence. "I kin work dat trick jest as easy as rolling off a log!"

"If you succeed in arranging the matter I will give you a couple of ounces."

"All right, sah, I will be glad to do it. De gemman is down-stairs now and I reckon I kin git him up hyer 'fore long."

"Very well, proceed. I want to have a talk with Mr. Blake, and I have reasons for wanting the matter kept quiet."

"Oh, you kin trust me, sah; I won't say nothing to nobody 'bout it."

And with this assurance the negro withdrew.

It was true, as the black said, that the Fresh of 'Frisco was in the saloon of the Hotel Mexico.

After his triumph over the Frenchman the enthusiastic citizens of El Paso insisted upon tendering him a reception, which he felt constrained to accept for it appeared ungracious to refuse the compliment.

Of course it was the Americans of El Paso who thus designed to honor the Fresh of 'Frisco, for the Mexican residents of the town had no love for Jackson Blake, and all the sports of that nationality who had courage enough to back their opinions that the Frenchman would win, being, at the end of the contest, cleaned out and disgusted, felt much more like giving the victor a ducking in the Rio Grande than a reception at the Hotel Mexico.

The "levee" had just ended when the negro entered the saloon.

The Fresh had succeeded in tearing himself away from his joyous friends when the servant entered.

Watching his opportunity the black followed Blake and on the way to the corral, whither the Fresh and his pards were going in quest of their horses, succeeded in getting a chance to speak to Blake without being seen by any one connected with the hotel.

He delivered his message, not forgetting to state that the Frenchman desired the matter should be managed so that no one would know of it, and adding that, by means of the rear entrance to the hotel, he could undoubtedly conduct the visitor to the room where the wounded man was, without any one in the house being the wiser.

The Fresh reflected over the matter for a moment, and then said to his two pards:

"Well, I don't see any reason why I should not oblige the man by complying with his request."

Both Ringwood and Old California Joe remarked that they knew of no objection, so while they proceeded to the corral to attend to their horses, Jackson Blake was conducted by the negro to the room occupied by the Frenchman.

"Aba, my brave friend, you have succeeded, I see!" De Charny exclaimed in a tone of satisfaction, bowing politely to the Fresh, who returned the salutation.

"Here are your ounces."

And he chinked the two pieces of silver into the hands of the black, who grinned with satisfaction.

"Now then," continued the adventurer, "just you keep watch outside in the entry, so as to give me timely warning of the approach of any one likely to enter my room, and there will be another ounce for you."

"All right, sah; I will do dat job right

up to de handle!" the black remarked, as he departed.

"Be seated, Mr. Blake," requested the Frenchman, waving his hand to a chair by the side of the bed, when the door closed behind the negro.

The Fresh sat down.

"Probably you are at a loss to know why I wished to have an interview with you," the adventurer remarked.

"Yes, I confess I cannot guess the reason."

"Well, I wanted to set myself right, in the first place," De Charny said. "I do not claim to be any better than I ought to be, but I have always tried to act like a gentleman, although in this quarrel with you I was tricked into acting a role which, now that I look back upon the performance, seems to me more like that of a hired bravo than anything else. I am going to make a full confession, though, of all the circumstances connected with the affair, and allow you to judge."

And then, briefly, the Frenchman detailed the unfortunate circumstances which had led his wandering footsteps to El Paso, and related all the particulars of his meeting with the Cubans.

"I can see now that they made a cat's-paw out of me, although I had no suspicion of it at the time. I presume they are enemies of yours, anxious for vengeance upon you," De Charny said, in conclusion.

"Upon my word, the whole affair is the biggest kind of a mystery!" the Fresh declared.

"I do not know either one of the Cubans, and so, consequently, never had any trouble with them."

"It is a mystery, indeed!" and then the wounded man related the particulars of his last interview with the pair.

"Well, well, they are anxious to have me wiped out!" the Fresh commented.

"If they are not acting for themselves—if they have no grudge against you, possibly they are acting for some one who has—some bitter foe of yours," the adventurer suggested.

"So it would seem," the Fresh remarked. "But the joke of the thing is that I am not aware of having any foe who feels bitter enough toward me to go to such trouble."

"The foo exists though, evidently."

"Yes, so it seems, and I must make it my business to discover him as soon as possible."

"That is a good idea, or otherwise he may get in a blow which will be apt to hurt."

"Well, I am much obliged to you for your warning, and I say, as you do not intend to act as the tool of this pair of precious villains, they will be apt to cut off the supplies the moment they discover the truth."

"Yes, and then I shall be helpless, but it is the fortune of war," the adventurer remarked, shrugging his shoulders like a true Frenchman.

"I will raise a subscription for you," Blake exclaimed. "There are plenty of sports in El Paso whose pocketbooks are always open in a case of this kind. Just you wait! Inside of an hour I'll have you on your legs again!"

And then the Fresh departed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHIPPING IN.

JACKSON BLAKE hurried at once to his pards in the corral.

"Put the horses up, boys," he said. "I have struck a little business which I must attend to before I go."

Then he related the particulars of his interview with the wounded Frenchman.

"Wa-al, I reckon that this ar' is a mighty mixed-up affair," Old California Joe remarked.

"As sure as you are born!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed.

"You know it was my opinion, boys, that neither one of these two Cubans bore me any love, though why a couple of strangers, whom I never run across before, should be anxious to do me harm was a mystery to me," the Fresh remarked.

"Tarnel strange!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"As queer a case, I reckon, as I ever struck," Ringwood observed, with a wise shake of the head.

"Of course there is a reason for it," Jackson Blake remarked. "Men do not go into a game of this kind without a motive."

"You kin bet all you are worth on that!" Old California Joe declared.

"Oh, yes, that would be a safe bet; these two Cubans put up a job on you, and they roped the Frenchman into the trick in an extremely neat manner, but what are they driving at—what is the motive?" Ringwood asked.

"I reckon it is the old war re-opened," the Fresh answered. "These fellows come from Cuba; in Cuba Manuel Escobedo and his sister, Isabel, found refuge when I made the neighborhood of the Rio Grande too hot to hold them. Rumor says that both of them are dead, but I reckon that is a cute device to throw me off the track."

"To kinder throw dust in yer eyes so as to be able to git a good lick at yer without you being on the lookout for it," the old scout suggested.

"Yes, I reckon that is about the size of it," said the Fresh. "As you will probably remem-

ber, boys, I have not taken any stock in these Cubans and got the idea, right at the beginning, that they were no friends of mine, although I really had no good reason for the belief, but now that I know the game they are playing I shall try to give them an opportunity to show their hand as soon as possible."

"That is the right idee!" Old California Joe declared.

"You bet it is!" Ringwood exclaimed. "It is not pleasant to be subject to attacks from secret enemies. If a man has got anything against me I want him to square the account as soon as possible. If there is anything in the world that I despise it is a sneak who skulks about waiting for a chance to stab a man in the back."

"Oh, you can bet your life that now I have got hold of the tail of the rat, I will force him to come out of his hole!" the Fresh of 'Frisco declared.

"No one ever yet accused me of being backward in coming forward when there was any chance for a row, no matter whether I had any business in the skirmish or not, and I can assure you that I will give these Cubans a chance to walk up to the captain's office and settle before they are a day older."

"In my mind there is very little doubt now in regard to the game. The Escobedos are alive—or at any rate one of them is—and since the attempt to beat me in a fair and open fight was not successful, the tactics are changed, and the trial is to be made of secret cunning."

"You are right for a thousand dollars!" Old California Joe cried. "And such a game just suits the Greasers to death. They are a pesky mean lot, and their best holt is trickery. Oh, I hate 'em like p'ison!"

"Joe puts the case pretty strongly," Dave Ringwood observed, "but from my experience with these Mexicans, I am not prepared to decide that he is far out of the way. There are good Mexicans of course, men who are gentlemen, and who would scorn to do a mean action, but for every one such man that you run across, you will find a dozen who cannot be trusted as far as you can see them, particularly such men as hang 'round a frontier town like El Paso."

"I will make them show their hand and declare their game the very first chance I get at them!" the Fresh declared. "And I reckon I will get an opportunity soon, for I am going to raise a subscription for this Frenchman. The man is helpless here without either money or friends, but I reckon when I let the boys know how the fellow is fixed, enough of them will chip in to raise a good-sized stake so he will be independent of this pair of sharpers."

"They played a very fine game," Dave Ringwood observed, with an approving shake of the head. "They calculated that the Frenchman would be just crazy to avenge his defeat, and since he could not hope to get the best of you in a fair fight he would be glad to assassinate you."

"That was the game!" the Fresh asserted. "But the Frenchman is nobody's fool, although he was rather rash in pitching on me, but he relied upon the fact that he was an expert swordsman, and never suspected that he would run across anybody in this far-off corner of the world who would be able to get away with him in a sword-fight."

"But we are wasting time, boys, chinning here!" the Fresh exclaimed, abruptly. "If I am going to do anything for the Frenchman I must get at it before the sharps get out of town."

The others agreed that this was true and the three started for the plaza.

"Dave, see if you can't hunt up a barrel or a box—something I can stand on, while I give the crowd a bit of a speech," the Fresh said, as the party entered the square.

There was an empty barrel—standing in front of an adjoining store and when Dave Ringwood proceeded to roll this into the middle of the street the attention of the men who happened to be in the neighborhood was at once attracted.

And when Jackson Blake got on the barrel all within sight of him came hurrying to the spot.

Then an idea occurred to the Fresh.

"I say, Ringwood, it wouldn't be a bad idea to get the gang from the hotel," he said. "With the aid of that instrument of torture I will be able to attract a crowd in no time."

"That is jest a bully idee!" Old California Joe declared.

"You bet it is," Ringwood assented. "I'll h'ist it out instanter." And he started for the hotel forthwith.

"W'ot's up, hey?" inquired a curious bystander, acting as spokesman for the rest.

"Well, fellow-citizens, I am going to try my hand at a little stump speech," the Fresh replied. "And I would like to have you gentlemen just scatter yourselves around town and drum up as many as you can to attend the meeting. Go into all the shebangs and tell the boys that the Fresh of 'Frisco is going to make a stump speech to the public on the plaza in front of the Hotel Mexico, and by so doing you will greatly oblige your humble servant to command."

"Sart'in, sart'in—you bet we will!" exclaimed

one of the crowd, and the rest echoed the words.

A dozen or so hastened to comply with the request.

And then came Dave Ringwood from the hotel, bearing the gong, followed by all the men who had been in the hotel saloon, including the two Cubans.

"Say, gi'n me the gong, and I will jest march up and down the plaza from one end to the other, and play town-crier," Old California Joe exclaimed. "That will draw the crowd, you bet."

The Fresh thought the idea was a good one, so the gong was given to the old scout, and he proceeded to wake the echoes of the town with it, stopping whenever he came to any place of common resort to proclaim that the Fresh of 'Frisco was going to make a stump speech in front of the Hotel Mexico.

And the result of this performance was that within ten minutes a goodly number of people collected around the barrel upon which the Fresh stood, all curious to know what he was going to say.

To the Americans in the assemblage there was nothing novel about a man delivering an address from the top of a barrel in a public square, but the Mexicans were greatly amazed, for they were not accustomed to such a proceeding.

When the Fresh saw that his audience had become as large as it was likely to be, he waved his hand to command their attention, and began:

"Fellow-citizens of El Paso, I am not much accustomed to public speaking, and I do not doubt that there are many men within the sound of my voice who would be able to give me points in regard to a game of this kind, but, under the circumstances, I have been forced to take a hand.

"I do not think I will be far out of the way if I jump to the conclusion that the majority of you gentlemen here were present in the bullring to-day, and witnessed the performance that took place there."

At this point a dozen or so of the listeners took it upon themselves to nod in the affirmative, and cry, "Yes, yes!"

"Well, fellow-citizens, it is on behalf of my late opponent that I now address you," Jackson Blake continued.

This announcement caused the majority of the crowd to look amazed, and the two Cubans, who formed a group with the alcalde and the chief of police, exchanged glances, and a dark look came over their faces.

"The Frenchman is in a pretty tight place, fellow-citizens!" Blake exclaimed. "He is a long way from home, badly wounded, and without either friends or money."

"Now, my dear pards, just put yourselves in the place of this unfortunate fellow, and see how you would like it!"

A large number of the crowd shook their heads in an extremely decided way, as much as to say that they did not enjoy the prospect.

"I propose to raise a subscription, so that this Frenchman will have money to pay his bills, and be able to go to his own home across the sea, and I am willing to chip in to the tune of fifty dollars, and that is the kind of man I am!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FRESH SCORES A SUCCESS.

THE spectators looked at each other for they were not accustomed to such liberality.

"Yes, fellow-citizens, I will chip in fifty dollars, and I want you all to give every cent that you think that you can spare," the Fresh continued.

"As I said before, put yourself in this man's place. Here he is many miles away from his native land, so far that it will cost him a small fortune to get home. In this country he is helpless, but when he strikes his own land again he will be all right, and I propose to help him to get home again, and I hope that all of you will put your shoulder to the wheel too."

"My pard here, Dave Ringwood, will go round with the hat. Now show what you are made of, you men of El Paso. Chip in and chip in liberally!"

"I do not expect that any of you are going to see my bluff of fifty dollars and ante up as much, but don't let that scare you out of the game. If you can't go that, give what you can; the smallest favors will be thankfully received and large ones in proportion. Don't be scared even if you have nothing better than a two bit piece, put that in and thank Heaven that you have got that much to give!"

Ringwood took off his hat and began to move around amid the crowd.

Nearly all the Americans contributed, the few that did not expressing their regret that they were not flush just at that time, but the Mexicans, as a rule, allowed the hat to pass them without putting anything in it, only a few of the sports contributing.

The Fresh kept his eyes upon Ringwood and when he approached the host of the Hotel Mexico, Blake exclaimed:

"Now then, Goldberg! look alive! Go down into your pocket and bring up the solid stuff!"

What kind of stuff are you made of, anyway, Moses?"

"Oh, my goodness! I am not a sport like you, Mr. Blake!" the landlord declared, decidedly put out at having the attention of the public thus drawn to him.

"Oh, come now, you can afford to shell out right handsomely!" the Fresh declared. "You made a good thing out of the show and you ought to be willing to help the man along, particularly since you will profit by his sickness, for by the time he gets well you will have a big bill against him."

The hotel-keeper made a grimace.

"Oh, I made very little out of the show!" he protested. "My expenses are very heavy and I shall make my bill to him very light too, but I will go a dollar—"

"Oh, only a dollar!" exclaimed Blake pretending to be deeply disgusted.

And the Americans in the crowd took up the cry.

"A dollar, oh!"

Goldberg became red in the face; he did not relish being jeered at and so he exclaimed:

"Well, well, I will make it five!" and he hastened to drop a five-dollar gold-piece into the hat.

"Goldberg, old boy, it ought to be ten at the least!" the Fresh declared. "But I suppose this time I will have to let you off with five, but I want you to understand that you are not coming up to the scratch in the way that you ought to do. What is five dollars to a man like you who has just been coining money in this town of El Paso for the last year or two?"

By this time Dave Ringwood had reached the spot where the two Farrals and the Cubans stood.

The Fresh had his eye upon the party, for it was his intention to utter a few pointed remarks in case the Cubans refused to contribute.

But the opportunity was not afforded him, for while the alcalde and the chief of police only dropped a dollar into the hat, each of the Cubans put in a five-dollar gold-piece.

"Half a saw-buck apiece!" exclaimed the Fresh, as his quick eyes caught the flash of the gold. "That is right! Much obliged to you, gentlemen: that is the right way to chip into a game of this kind!"

"Oh, I say, Goldberg, these gentlemen are making you look awful small! They have come right up to your ante, yet you have made money out of the man while they are strangers to him!"

The hotel-keeper was shamed by this declaration, and so he made haste to produce another five-dollar piece.

"There, that makes ten for me!" he exclaimed as he tossed it into the hat. "You ought to be satisfied with that."

"Yes, that will do pretty well, although, really, Goldberg, considering that you made a good thing out of the show you ought to have sand enough to pony up fifty as I did."

"Oh, my goodness!" cried the wily host, "you want to ride a free horse to death!"

When the collection was completed Ringwood returned to the Fresh and he counted the money.

"Two hundred and six dollars!" Jackson Blake announced. "Fellow-citizens, this is something like, and I really feel proud of El Paso. This sum will put the Frenchman on his feet again and he will be able to get back to his home. Mr. Weinholdt!" the Fresh continued, addressing the banker, who stood a short distance away. "Will you have the kindness to take charge of this money and hold it subject to Mr. De Charny's orders?"

"Certainly," said the banker, coming forward. "And although I have already contributed, yet in order to make the sum an even one I will go four dollars more."

"Much obliged, Mr. Weinholdt!" the Fresh exclaimed, with a polite bow to the banker. "You are a white man all the way through—all wool and a yard wide. Here's the cash."

Then after delivering the money to the banker Blake again addressed the crowd:

"Gentlemen, I am very much obliged to you all for the liberal manner in which you have responded to my call," he said. "One of the old book sharps once wrote something about one touch of kindness making the whole world akin, and I reckon there is a good deal of truth in the saying. You have helped an unfortunate man out of a hole. Now, while I am not hoping that any of you will be so unlucky as to get into a similar scrape, yet if such a thing should happen, I trust you will be fortunate enough to strike men who will be willing to help you along as you have helped this stranger."

"Three cheers for the Fresh!" cried one of the Americans in the crowd.

The cheers were given with a will, Blake bowed his acknowledgments, got down from the barrel, and the crowd began to disperse. With his two pards the Fresh proceeded to the apartment of the wounded man and related to him how successful the endeavor had been to raise a purse.

De Charny was extremely grateful.

"I shall not tarry here long," he said. "This wound, although painful, is not one that will

prevent me from traveling soon. Within a week, at the latest, I shall be able to set out. I shall go straight from here to New Orleans and there take a steamer for France, and I assure you I shall not be sorry to shake the dust of this New World from my feet."

"The Cubans will be rather astonished at this move, I think," the Fresh remarked.

"Yes, undoubtedly, but though they will not be able to use me for a tool, they will not be apt to give up their design to injure you, so you must be on your guard."

"Oh, I shall, rest assured of that."

Then, after wishing the Frenchman a pleasant journey to his own land, the Fresh and his pards withdrew.

The Cubans were on the watch and, after the Americans had gone, they entered the room.

De Charny, a complete master of the art of dissimulation, received them as though he believed them to be the dearest friends he had in the world.

"Ah, I am glad you have come!" he exclaimed. "You are just in time to congratulate me. You have heard of my windfall of fortune, I presume?"

"Oh, yes," Gomes replied, "both myself and my friend here contributed. Of course, this American was not aware that you had friends, like myself and Esparto here, who would see that all your wants were supplied."

"Yes, yes, you have been friends indeed!" the adventurer exclaimed. "Never while I live will I forget your kindness; I was not at all worried about the future, knowing I could depend upon you. At the same time I am glad to get this cash, for now I will be able to return to France."

"Do you not think that the raising of this subscription was a cunning trick on the part of the American to get you out of the way?" Gomes suggested.

"Perhaps—it may be," the Frenchman responded, with a wise shake of the head.

"He feared that when you recovered from your wound you might endeavor to revenge yourself upon him," Gomes remarked.

"Possibly so; but it is hard to tell; these Americans are a strange people," the adventurer replied, thoughtfully. "The more I see of them the more I am amazed. They are like their kindred, the English John Bulls. A man can never tell what they will do. They commit the wildest and most incomprehensible acts."

"But as these Americans say, a man would be a fool to look a gift horse in the mouth, and so I take the money without troubling myself to ask why it was given me."

"Oh, undoubtedly the American fears your vengeance, and has raised this money so as to enable you to depart, and thus he hopes to escape meeting you again," Esparto observed with a sneer.

"If that is his game, the man has calculated admirably," the Frenchman replied. "For, most assuredly, now that I have the money to leave this country, where I have met with nothing but misfortune, I shall get away as soon as I can."

"Without attempting to seek for revenge upon the man who humbled you?" Gomes observed.

"I am satisfied; I was beaten in a fair fight, and so badly beaten that I am not anxious for another trial," De Charny rejoined.

The Cubans saw that it was useless for them to attempt to change the Frenchman's resolution, and so after a few more words they took their departure.

"We must try some new device," Gomes remarked, as the pair proceeded along the entry.

"Yes; open force seems to be useless with this American demon, so we must try secret cunning," the other rejoined.

CHAPTER XXV.

DOC MOSES SUGGESTS A GAME.

"Now we will go for our horses again, and make another attempt to get home," the Fresh remarked, as he and his pards quitted the hotel.

But he was destined to be again interrupted, for as the party came to the lane which led to the corral they encountered Doc Moses, the leading sporting man of the town.

"Hello, Blake! I want to have a little private conversation with you, if you can spare the time," the veteran sport remarked.

"Certainly; yours to command," replied the Fresh. "Get out the horses, boys, so as to be all ready to start after I get through."

"We will turn up the lane, then we will have a chance to talk without interruption," said the veteran sport.

"All right."

So, while Dave Ringwood and Old California Joe proceeded to the corral, the Fresh and Doc Moses went slowly up the lane.

"Blake, I don't know but what I am going to take a little bit of liberty with you, but, as an old acquaintance, I hope you will not mind it," the sport began.

"Oh, no; I reckon not. You are too old a hand, I take it, to do anything out of the way."

"Did you ever watch a game of chess or checkers?"

Can't you see my fifty and go me ten better?

"Of course."

"And did you ever remark that the lookers-on generally see lots of good moves that the players don't?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, sometimes in this game of life which we are playing, it is that way. Men who are not concerned see moves which the men who are interested do not."

"I reckon I understand what you are driving at," the Fresh remarked. "You see some move which you think I ought to make, and you have a suspicion that I am not aware of it."

"That is the idea to a hair!"

"Well, I am not generally very short-sighted, and, as a rule, I manage to see about all the good moves on the board; still, it is possible that some such move may have escaped me," the Fresh replied, in a reflective sort of way.

"It is none of my business, of course," the sport admitted. "But as the move is a right good one I thought you ought to be posted in regard to it, for I kinder have an idea that you don't see it."

"Go ahead! you are too solid and square a man to go into a thing without there was something in it," Blake remarked.

"Did you notice to-day that at the end of your night with the Frenchman—just as you laid him out, one of the ladies in the circle fainted?"

"I knew there was a commotion in front, but I didn't know what caused it."

"The lady sat only a few seats from me so I had a chance to see what the trouble was. It was Miss Margaret Escobedo who fainted."

A slight shade came over the face of the Fresh of Frisco.

"I was not aware that she was present, and I wonder at her being there too, for I know she does not believe in attending any of these barbarous affairs, as Eastern people would be apt to term such a show."

"Yes, I have heard that she objected to attending bull fights and sports of a like nature, but she was there to-day, and I can tell you, Blake, she did not enjoy it a bit; she was as pale as death and trembled like a leaf; she had a friend with her—that Eastern girl who is paying a visit to her ranch, but though she too was ill at ease, yet she did not betray the emotion that the heiress of Escobedo did."

"And I suppose you jumped to the conclusion that the girl was anxious about me!"

"That was what I thought. She was afraid you would get hurt in the fight, and yet, with that morbidness which seems to be so strong in some natures, she could not resist the impulse which bade her come and see the fight, but when it ended with your triumph, the strained nerves could stand it no longer and she fainted."

"I reckon, Doc, that you have got this thing down as fine as any medical sharp in the country could bring it."

"Yes, I rather pride myself on the fact that I am a pretty good judge of human nature," the sport replied.

"Well, from these facts what do you reckon?"

"To put it plainly, I reckon that the girl is dead in love with you, and if you choose to enter for the race, Margaret Escobedo, the richest girl in all this part of the country, and finest and handsomest one that I know of all along the line of the Rio Grande, can be won by you with very little trouble."

"Kind of a walk-over for me, eh?"

"That is about the size of it."

"That is a mighty fine prospect."

"I never run across a finer!" Doc Moses declared emphatically.

"The girl is well worth the winning if she did not have a single ducat at her back."

"True, every word of it!" Blake admitted.

"But when you consider that she is jest rolling in wealth—can put up the dollars with any man or woman in a hundred square miles—why, she is a prize worth any man's while. An' she is yours, Blake, if you want her!" Doc Moses declared. "I feel as certain of it as though the girl had told me so with her own lips. All you have to do is to enter the game and the stake is yours."

"That is a remarkably fine outlook, eh?"

"You bet!" cried the old sport.

"Well, as I told you, I am generally farsighted enough, and this move has not escaped me. I have felt sure for quite a while now that I stood a good chance to win the lady if I chose to enter the lists, but there are two or three reasons which have prevented me from going into the game," the Fresh remarked slowly.

"Of course it is not possible for me to look at the matter from your standpoint," the veteran sport remarked, "and therefore I am completely in the dark as to your reasons, but as far as I can see, you are just the man to go into the scheme."

"Doc, as a rule I am not in the habit of showing my hand to any one," the Fresh observed. "Nearly all my life I have been so situated that I have had to play a lone hand, but in this case, as I feel sure you are a friend of mine, and as you have taken the trouble to put me on the scent of a good thing, I will explain why I have held back."

"Now, Blake, I don't want you to think that

I spoke about this matter with any idea of prying into your affairs!" the sharp exclaimed.

"Oh, I understand that. You are not the kind of man to worry yourself about what does not concern you," the Fresh remarked. "And I have perfect confidence, too, that anything I say to you will be strictly confidential."

"I will give you my word as to that," the other replied.

"Well, then, to come down to business, just put yourself in my place—"

"I wish I could!" Doc Moses exclaimed. "You can bet all the ducats you can raise that I would go for that girl so quick that it would make my head swim!"

"Oh, no! Just think of the difference that there is between a man such as I am, and a woman such as she is."

"Well, you are not as well-fixed, of course, but for that matter, there isn't any other man round here that is, either, and simply because the girl is worth a few millions ought not to make any difference."

"That is true enough, but I am not referring to money."

"What are you driving at, then?"

"The wide difference that there is in our social positions," the Fresh replied.

"This girl, you must remember, is a well-educated Easterner; one brought up where civilization reigns; not a child of the wild and woolly West."

"On, I understand that, of course," the old sport observed. "She is a first-class lady, nary discount on that—as fine a one as ever struck the Rio Grande."

"Well, now, do you think I could pass muster as a first-class gentleman?" Blake asked.

"Why not?" the veteran demanded. "I reckon you will fill the bill as well as any man that can be scared up in this region, and I am not flattering you a bit, either, when I say it. I reckon I am a judge of the article, too, seeing as how I have run a faro-game in almost every big city clear from New York to the Golden Gate."

"Yes, you ought to know what you are talking about," the Fresh observed.

"I think myself that if I chose to brace up, and have some style about me, to use our Western saying, that I would be able to pass muster in pretty decent society, but that don't alter the fact that in my time I have been a sharp of the first water; in fact, at one period in my career, on the Pacific Slope, I was so successful in winning the cash of the men who dared to wager their ducats against mine that I have been waited upon by deputations of the leading citizens and politely requested to make it convenient to honor some other camp with my presence."

"Oh, that is nothing," Doc Moses rejoined. "I have been run out of a dozen camps by the Vigilantes myself, and I am sure I am none the worse for it. Mighty few lucky sports will a man strike in this Western country who can boast that they haven't run afoul of the Vigilantes at some time in their careers. It is a penalty that a man is obliged to pay for being an expert in his business. If you look at it in the right light it is really a compliment."

"No doubt, no doubt, but the world at large hardly considers it so," the Fresh observed.

"But to come back to our muttn. One reason why I do not go in for the heiress of Escobedo is because of the bad record that I have, and another—which may seem absurd to you—is that I am not sure whether I can content myself to settle down to a quiet, hum-drum life. I have been quiet for two years now, and once in a while the fever in my blood is so strong that it seems as if I must resume my old life of adventure again."

"I know how that is; I was like you when I was your age, but time will alter that," Doc Moses observed, with the air of a sage.

"Now, if you take my advice, you will not allow these things to trouble you, but go in and win the heiress. There isn't any society along the Rio Grande that you can't hold your own in, particularly when you have the Escobedo wealth at your back."

"I believe you are right, and I will try the raffle!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"Good luck go with your game!" Doc Moses cried, and they shook hands and parted.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FRESH TELLS HIS SOFT TALE.

JUST as the two men parted, Dave Ringwood and Old California Joe came down the alley with the horses.

"Pards, I am a little puzzled about one thing," the Fresh observed when the others came up to him.

"What is it?" Ringwood asked.

"Spirit her out, Cap!" Old California Joe exclaimed.

"It is in regard to these two Cubans."

"What of the n?" Ringwood questioned.

"I am rather bothered in regard to how I ought to act toward them," the Fresh remarked. "From what the Frenchman told me—and there is no doubt in my mind that he did not speak a word outside of the truth—the

inference seems strong that these two fellows sought to have me killed, and after their first attempt resulted in a failure, they did their level best to work the Frenchman up so that he would be led to assassinate me when he got well enough to attend to a job of that kind."

"I reckon there isn't any mistake about that," Ringwood remarked.

"Mistake about it—nary time!" the old mountain-man exclaimed. "Why, it is as plain as the nose on your face!"

"As far as I know there is no reason why they should want to go for me, for I have not trodden on the toes of either one of them to my knowledge," the Fresh remarked. "But, as I told you, I have a suspicion that they are the agents of my old-time enemies, the brother and sister whom I drove away."

"That seems to be the only reasonable explanation," Dave Ringwood observed.

"It is jest like these 'tarnel Greasers!" Old California Joe exclaimed. "I never met one of 'em yit that wasn't up to all sorts of tricks. They are as mean as all git out! The most of 'em would a heap sight rather strike a man in the back, or give him a lick in the dark, than go in for a fair fight."

"Joe, you are putting it a little strong, yet there is no doubt that a great number of the Mexicans are both treacherous and cowardly," Blake remarked.

That is my experience with them," Dave Ringwood observed. "Of course you will find good and bad men in every race, but as far as my acquaintance with the Mexicans goes, I have been unlucky enough to meet a deuced sight more bad men than good."

"To my notion the Greasers are a heap sight like the Injuns," Old California Joe declared. "The only good Injun is a dead Injun, and the only good Mexican is a dead one."

"Ah, Joe, you are putting it a little too strongly now," the Fresh objected.

"Not a mite!" the old mountain-man replied.

"I reckon you don't know the tribe as well as I do. Oh, you bet I know the Greasers from 'way-back!"

"Well, to return to what I was saying," observed the Fresh. "I do not relish the idea that there are a couple of fellows in this town of El Paso who are ready to take a crack at me whenever they get a chance, without being obliged to show their hands."

"It is not pleasant," Ringwood remarked.

"You kin bet yer bottom dollar it ain't!" Old California Joe declared.

"If the pair would come out openly, so as to give me a chance at them, I would not mind," Blake observed. "It is this work in the dark that I object to. Of course, the only proof I have that the pair did strike at me is the Frenchman's statement, so that I am rather in a quandary. If I should attempt to bring them to a reckoning by openly charging them with attacking me, bringing forward the Frenchman's statement as proof, they undoubtedly would declare that it was not true, and they would crawl out of the matter by pretending that the only reason they backed the Frenchman was because they were anxious to see some sport."

"Well, the statement would appear probable, for they would back it up by saying, 'Why should we attack you? You are a stranger to us, and we hav'n't anything against you,'" Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Exactly, that would be their game beyond a doubt, and I could not prove that they were actuated by any malice against me," the Fresh responded.

"Wa-al, I dunno," said the old mountain-man, slowly; "but it seems to me that if I had a thing of this kind to work, that I would go right at it and take the bull by the horns, so to speak, you know. If I spicioned that this byer pair of Cubans were a-trying to play roots on me, I would jest make it my business to pick a fuss with them—g'in 'em a chance, you know, to come up to the captain's office to settle."

"Yes, that idea occurred to me, and if I were differently situated from the way I am I should lose no time in forcing a quarrel upon them," the Fresh rejoined, thoughtfully.

"But there are good reasons for my not going ahead in that way," he continued. "In the first place, I am on my good behavior now, and I do not want to have it said that I forced a quarrel upon any one. Then again there is the chance that these Cubans would not be forced into a fight, no matter how much I provoked them."

"That is true!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed. "I thought of that."

"That is so, sure as ye'r born!" the old scout admitted. "They might let on that you was so big a chief that they wouldn't stand no show with you, nohow, and allow that they would be a couple of fools for to go into a skirmish when it was a dead certainty that they would come out losers."

"Joe has figured it up about right, I reckon," the Fresh said. "At present I don't see as there is a chance for me to do anything. If the Cubans don't want to fight I cannot very well make them come up to the scratch, and any attempt on my part to gore them into a fight would make me seem like a desperado, and I

have mighty good reasons just now for wanting to appear at my best."

"As far as I can see, the only thing you can do is to keep on the watch, and if the Cubans try any more games you may be able to catch them in such a way that they cannot get out of it, and then you will be able either to make them give you satisfaction or else force them to dust out of El Paso," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Yes, I must ride a waiting race this time," the Fresh coincided. "And now let us be off for home."

Five minutes later the party were across the Rio Grande, and well on their way.

There were few words spoken during the homeward trip, for the Fresh was strangely reserved, seemingly involved in meditation.

He contemplated taking a step which would materially change the current of his life.

His mind was almost made up in regard to the matter, but he resolved to take no step until the morrow.

"I will sleep on it to-night, and then, if my mind is still the same, in the morning I will try my luck with the heiress of Escobedo," he murmured.

When the morning came the Fresh was up bright and early.

His mind had not changed during the night, excepting that the resolution to woo, and if possible, win the beautiful heiress was stronger than when he retired to rest.

After breakfast there were some matters appertaining to the ranch which required his attention, and then he mounted his horse and rode over to the Escobedo Ranch.

Fortune favored the Fresh, for he was lucky enough to find Margaret alone; as a rule, the heiress and her friend, Miss Melville, were seldom apart.

That the heiress of Escobedo was pleased to see her visitor, was apparent from the glad light which shone in her eyes, and the bright color coming up in her cheeks.

The Fresh of 'Frisco was as abrupt and peculiar in his love-making as he was in many other respects.

He came at once to the errand upon which he had ridden forth.

"Miss Escobedo, I have come over this morning to ask your opinion of me," he said.

A look of amazement appeared on the face of the girl.

"My opinion of you?" she asked.

"Yes, I want to know what kind of a fellow you think I am, anyway?"

"What an odd question!"

"It is a very important one to me, I assure you, or else I would not trouble you with it. From the way you have always treated me, I have been led to believe that when I come to your ranch I am not an unwelcome guest."

"Indeed you are not unwelcome! Are you not the man who once saved me from a fate which to me would have been worse than death?" Margaret exclaimed, with a sudden outburst. "And while I live I shall never be able to pay you for that service!"

"Oh, yes, you will; you can settle that account very easily if you wish so to do."

"How?" exclaimed Margaret, her face full of astonishment.

"By giving me the right to protect you for the rest of your life."

Up came the red blushes into the girl's face and down swept the lids over the glorious eyes.

She understood now what the Fresh of 'Frisco sought.

"Margaret, I love you, will you be my wife?" the suitor asked.

His strong arm was around her slender waist and he clasped her hand in his.

"Yes," came the whispered reply.

And then, Blake drew the not unwilling maiden to his breast and imprinted upon her ripe, red lips the seal of love.

It was not the first time that Jackson Blake had won the affection of a young girl's heart and been made happy by her soft confession, but this girl was so different from the rest that he felt as he had never felt before.

"You will be mine then?" he said.

"Yes, but do not let us stay here," she replied. "I cannot bear this wild Western land; carry me back to the quiet East where I can live in peace."

"All right, I will do so," the Fresh declared, the idea striking him as being an exceedingly good one.

In the East, far from the scenes wherein he had played so prominent a part, he could carve out a new life; there would be nothing in the East to remind him of the turbulent past.

And now we will leave the lovers to whisper those soft nothings which are so much to them and so little to others, and turn our attention elsewhere.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORE PLOTTING.

Two more disgusted and disappointed men than the Cubans, as they made their way from the Frenchman's room to the saloon of the Hotel

Mexico, could hardly have been found in the town of El Paso.

After entering the saloon they made their way to a couple of chairs at the extreme end of the room, remote from the door, and sat down.

In this position they could converse freely, for they were some distance from the bar, near which the loungers in the saloon usually gathered.

"Well, what do you think of the outlook now?" Gomes asked, after they were seated.

"Very bad, indeed," Esparto replied, with a shake of the head.

"Yes, no doubt about that. We need not expect anything more from the Frenchman."

"That is true," Esparto coincided. "Thanks to the money that this American has raised for him he is independent. He would be a fool indeed to remain here for the purpose of killing the man who has provided him with the money to pay his bills and take him to his home."

"And this Frenchman is no fool, although we did succeed in getting him to do our work," Gomes remarked, with a wise shake of the head.

"Ah, but that was because he had no idea he could find any man in an out-of-the-way corner of the world like this who would be able to stand against him in a sword-fight.

"It was a very natural mistake for a man to make," Esparto continued. "And I do not wonder that the Frenchman jumped to the conclusion that he had an easy task before him, particularly as he knew nothing about the man whom he was to encounter."

"Pray take into consideration that you, who knew what the Fresh of 'Frisco is, thought the Frenchman would succeed in killing him."

"Very true," Gomes admitted. "But it was because I thought that in a sword fight he would be taken at a decided disadvantage, although I knew he was skillful enough with ordinary weapons."

"Some of these Americans are regular devils!" Esparto declared.

"This Fresh of 'Frisco certainly seems to have more luck than usually falls to the lot of a human," Gomes remarked.

"He is both shrewd and daring, and that has as much to do with his success as luck, I think," Esparto answered.

"Possibly, but he is lucky, too," the other persisted. "Now, see in this case: If he had not taken it into his head to collect this money, the Frenchman would have been forced to rely upon us, and there is no doubt that when he recovered from his wound, we could have persuaded him to play the bravo and assassinate the Fresh."

"Yes, I think myself there was a chance that we could have worked the game in that way," Esparto observed, reflectively. "But that is all knocked in the head now."

"Oh, yes, we cannot calculate upon the Frenchman to do anything more," Gomes remarked.

"What do you think about this matter?" exclaimed Esparto, abruptly. "What induced Blake to bother himself about raising the money?"

"Satan knows!" Gomes declared, with a shake of the head. "It was merely one of those wild ideas that these Americans are apt to get. They are a nation of maniacs, and it is almost impossible for any one to guess in advance what mad things they will do next."

"I do not agree with you there—not in regard to this case," Esparto observed, slowly.

"No? You do not?"

Esparto shook his head.

"What do you think, then?"

"The suspicion has come into my head that it is no wild freak—no act done on the spur of the moment."

"What then?"

"It was carefully calculated."

"But I do not understand."

"I think that Blake has a suspicion that we are interested in the matter," Esparto replied.

"Well, we certainly volunteered to second the Frenchman, but there wasn't anything out of the way in that," Gomes urged.

"Certainly not! If we were in truth total strangers to the man, as we were supposed to be, we might, under the circumstances, have volunteered to assist him, he being a stranger to El Paso like ourselves, but from the manner in which Blake watched us when the man went around with the hat the idea came to me that he suspected us."

"Of what—suspected of what—that we set the Frenchman on him?" Gomes inquired.

"Yes."

"But I do not see how he could suspect us!" the other exclaimed. "I am sure we planned the scheme with wonderful skill. Even the Frenchman himself could not say that we urged him or hired him to make the attack; we merely suggested that as the Fresh was a man with a great reputation as a fighter there was a chance for him to make some money by engaging in a contest with Blake."

"Ab, yes, that is all true enough!" Esparto exclaimed, impatiently, "but now you are not giving Blake credit for possessing the shrewdness with which undoubtedly he is gifted. In

some way—how, of course, I know not—he has set out the trap, and his collecting the money for the Frenchman was a cunning device to get him out of the way, so that we would not be able to use him for a tool any more."

Gomes pondered over the matter for a moment.

"Upon my word! I don't know but what you are right," he said at last. "Your wits were always keener than mine and I should not be surprised if you have hit upon the truth."

"I am satisfied of it; although beyond the fact of the Fresh interesting himself in collecting this money, and the peculiar way in which he kept his eyes upon us when his pard came around with the hat, I have not anything to go upon."

"In some way the suspicion came to the Fresh that we were the instigators of the attack, and he reasoned that when the Frenchman recovered he would be here without friends or money, entirely dependent upon us, and in such a condition would be apt to be ready to go into any desperate scheme, and so he quietly said to himself, 'I will act upon the old Spanish proverb and build a bridge of silver for a flying enemy,' therefore he raised the money so the Frenchman could depart."

"Yes, yes, I think you are right!" Gomes exclaimed. "And now we must be on our guard."

"Against an attack from the Fresh?"

"Yes, you know him of old; he is not the man to keep quiet if he thinks any one is trying to injure him. He is one of the kind who believes in carrying the war into an enemy's territory."

"That used to be true of him, but, according to the reports, he has been remarkably quiet during this last year," Esparto remarked.

"From what they say it would seem that he has taken particular care to keep out of all quarrels, in place of rushing into them as he used to do."

"Degenerated down into a respectable citizen!" exclaimed Gomes, with a sneer.

"And can you not comprehend the reason?" Esparto remarked.

"Oh, yes, it is a part of his game to win the heiress of Escobedo!" Gomes replied, an angry frown darkening his face. "But I swear he shall never do that while I live! I would sooner kill the girl with my own hand!"

"It may come to that yet," Esparto remarked. "But time will tell."

"Yes; it is our game, of course, to remove the Fresh, but sooner than see him in possession of the Escobedo property I would kill the heiress herself."

"I hope it will not be as bad as that; but now let us look ahead a little. Suppose my suspicion is correct that Blake looks upon us as the instigators of the attack upon him and endeavors to call us to an account?"

"Oh, we will not allow ourselves to be drawn into a quarrel!" Gomes replied, with a crafty smile. "And even a wild and reckless fellow like the Fresh will find it hard to have a difficulty with men who will not resent affronts."

"Yes, that is our game," Esparto observed, after reflecting about the matter for a few moments. "It is useless for us to think of getting the best of a dare devil like this Fresh of 'Frisco in an open fight. He would conquer us beyond a doubt. Our only hope is to encompass his death by some secret means."

"There is an old saying that when a man has evil work on hand, Satan always sends some tool to do the job," Gomes observed. "But in this matter, his sable Highness is not favoring us, for though we have murder in our hearts, yet no proper instrument appears."

"Oh, he will come in time," Esparto assented.

"In such a town as El Paso there must be plenty of men who would be glad to do our work, if we could only find them."

Hardly had the words been uttered when the door of the saloon was thrown open with a bang, and into the place came a big, brawny fellow, with long, black hair and a matted beard of the same hue.

He was dressed like a cowboy, and carried a fine array of weapons in his belt.

Stalking up to the bar, he threw a gold-piece on the counter, following it up with a bang of his fist on the board which made the glasses rattle.

"Thar's a gold sawbuck for you, an' I want a pint of blood!"

This astonishing announcement drew the attention of everybody in the place.

"Ten good solid dollars in this hyer bit of gold," the stranger continued, "and I don't set no more value onto 'em than if they were so many bits of copper!"

And after this declaration the speaker glared around him, as if for the purpose of seeing if there was anybody in the room who had any idea of disputing this statement.

"I'm the king of the cowboys, and you kin bet all your solid wealth on it, too! I ride on the lightning, turn my cows with a thunder-clap, and drink fire!"

"Set 'em up now, harkeep'; a pint of blood for Jim Bull—Wild Bull of the Pecos, the biggest man thar is to-day in this hyer State of Texas, bar none!"

The Fresh in Texas.

"Satan has answered your prayer!" Esparto exclaimed, in the ear of Gomes. "Here is the man who can be got to fight the Fresh of 'Frisco!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WILD BULL OF THE PECOS.

"I AM very sorry, but we are out of gore just now," remarked Billy Long, the affable bartender of the Hotel Mexico Saloon, betraying no more surprise at the odd demand than if it was a common thing for strangers to stalk into the saloon and call for a drink of the human life-current.

"What do you mean by gore?" the burly fellow demanded, with a scowl. "It was a pint of blood that I axed you for."

"Oh, yes, exactly; we have jest run out of that too, although in a first-class bar-room like this hyer we generally calculate to keep on hand about everything that a customer is likely to ask for."

"Do you call this a first-class bar?" exclaimed the stranger, with a snarl like a wild beast.

The experienced bartender saw the fellow was inclined to be ugly and that it was necessary to handle him with caution.

"Well, what I mean, is first class for this section of country, you know," Billy Long hastened to explain. "Along the Rio Grande, of course, we can't hold a candle to the saloons in the big cities."

"Wa-al, I reckon you kin not, and that is the sort of thing that I have been used to, you bet yer boots!" the stranger exclaimed.

"Of course, anybody could see that with half an eye!" the barkeeper replied. "Now, if you wanted whisky, or brandy or gin, or any of the common drinks, I reckon we can accommodate you to the queen's taste."

"How's yer whisky?" growled the big fellow.

"It is jest big!" ejaculated the bartender. "I will back it ag'in' any bug-juice that kin be scared up along the bull line of the Rio Grande!"

"Will it burn all the way down?" the cowboy demanded, with a fearful scowl.

"Well, now, you kin bet it will!" the genial Billy replied. "It is the kind of stuff warranted to warm up the cockles of a man's heart."

"Why, I have known a man to get drunk in hyer on Monday and not git sobered up for three days!"

"That is it," the stranger exclaimed. "That is the kind of stuff I am looking for. Give me about a quart of it."

With a flourish, the bartender set a bottle and glass on the counter.

The cowboy filled the glass to the very brim with the whisky, then drank it at a single swallow.

"Aba!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips, "that is pretty fair stuff, but I have drank a heap sight better. It don't take hold and twist a man's innards the way it ought to. Hain't you got something with a heap sight more liquid fire into it than this weak stuff?"

"I see, I see! I understand what you want," the barkeeper exclaimed, affecting to be very much interested in the matter. "You want a drink which will kinder give you the idea that it is a torch-light procession going down."

"That's it! that's it!" the big fellow exclaimed. "Now you hit me where I live when you say that!"

"Well, stranger, I am jest the man that kin fix up a drink of that kind for you," the barkeeper exclaimed. "Jest lemme mix you a red-hot cocktail, and if it don't suit, then I'll stand treat for the hull gang."

"Wa-al, I don't go much on mixed drinks," the cowboy said. "But seeing as how you seem to know what you are talking about, I will let you wade in."

The barkeeper was an old hand at the business; years of experience on the frontier had taught him how to deal with customers of this kind.

He proceeded to compound a drink, using all the liquors at his command, first putting at the bottom of the glass a good dash of cayenne pepper.

It was a dose well calculated to blister the throat of an ordinary man, and although it was the cowboy's boast that his throat was lined with copper, yet the fiery mixture made him wince, and caused the tears to come into his eyes as he swallowed it.

In a bravado spirit he had downed the glass at one gulp.

"How is that, pard! Does that go to the right spot?" inquired the bartender with a grin, as he noticed the effect produced by the potent draught.

"You kin bet yer life that ar' cocktail is red hot, and no mistake!" the stranger declared.

"But I am jest the man who kin get away with sich stuff as that and don't you forget it! I am a chief, I am! The biggest chief that ever struck this town of El Paso! I chew meat and live on b'ar! If you have got any fighting men around this burg, I would jest like to have you trot 'em out, so I kin have a chance to size them up!"

And as he made the declaration the big fellow turned his back to the bar, threw out his mas-

sive chest, stretched his long arms, and cast a look of defiance around him.

"Do you hear me, you El Paso men, it is my horn w'at is a-blowl'in'!" he continued.

"I am a warrior and a bad man from way-back, and I am jest hungry for a chance to chaw some one up! It don't matter the wag of a goat's tail to me who it is, white or black, red or yaller; I am anybody's antelope w'at wants to go inter this hyer cowtillion!"

It was a bold defiance—as bold a one as had been given in the old town of El Paso for many a day, and yet, although there were in the room a half-a-dozen men who were renowned as fighters none of them manifested any idea of coming forward, and taking up the stranger's challenge and thus maintaining the honor of the town.

It was not strange though, for the cowboy had all the appearances of being an extremely ugly customer.

He was an unusually big fellow, and, notwithstanding his size, seemed to be as active and quick as an ordinary man.

Then, too, although this was his first appearance in the town of El Paso, yet he was not unknown, for his reputation had preceded him, and there wasn't a man in the room who did not understand that a challenge from such a warrior as this meant a combat to the death.

It would be no ordinary boxing match, but a bloody contest where the lives of both the actors would be put in peril.

Therefore the bullies of El Paso shrunk from the encounter.

Perceiving that no one moved to accept his challenge the cowboy proceeded to express his opinion in regard to the El Paso men.

"Wa-al, wa-al, durn me if this don't beat my time!" he exclaimed. "Why, what sort of a town have you got hyer anyway? Is this El Paso or ain't it? I never was hyer before, but I have allers heard that El Paso was a right smart town and that if a man wanted fun he could find as much of it to the square inch as in any other town along the Rio Grande."

"Say, pard, w'ot has got inter yer burg?" he addressed the question directly to the barkeeper.

"Well, El Paso is pretty lively as a rule," Billy Long replied. "And men who come byer arter fun generally succeed in getting all they want, but, really, the town seems to be kinder quiet just now."

"Hope I ain't scared them clean out of thar boots!" the cowboy exclaimed with a grin.

"I reckon you have kinder bluffed the town though," the barkeeper admitted.

"Wa-al, I am sorry for it," the stranger remarked with a solemn wag of the head, "for bluffing is not my best holt. Thar ain't any brag about me. I am the good, old, solid holdfast, and you won't find any better man than me to tie to clear from the Mexican Gulf to the Rocky Mountains. I am the clear white article and no mistake!"

"Sorry I ain't able to skeer up a little fun in yer rauch, but I will be in to see you ag'in afore I leave town; so-long!"

Then the cowboy gathered up the change which the bartender had placed upon the counter and stalked from the saloon, all within the place gazing after him.

The Cubans approached the bar.

"That fellow is a decided character," Gomes remarked.

"Gentlemen, you would be safe in betting all you are worth onto it!" Billy Long declared.

"I rather think he would be a troublesome customer in a fight," Esparto observed.

"Oh, yes, you bet he would!" the barkeeper declared, emphatically. "Thar is not a man that I know of along the Rio Grande whom I would not rather see come into any place that I was running than that same cowboy, for when he is on a tear he is jest as ugly as they make 'em!"

"Ah, you know the man then?" Gomes inquired.

"Oh, yes, I have heern tell on him a hundred times, although I never saw him before!" the barkeeper replied.

"Why, gents, do you s'pose I would have stood any sich chin music as he gave me from any ordinary man? Well, now, you had better believe I wouldn't! No, siree, boss-fly, nohow! I would have pulled my gun on him and made him slip away from this byer bar!"

And in order to give due emphasis to the declaration the barkeeper produced a big revolver which was on a small shelf, underneath the bar, convenient to his hand.

"You were all ready for war, I see," Gomes remarked.

"Yes, sir, you bet your sweet life I am! And this is the way I am fixed all the time too!" Billy Long declared. "I haven't joggled glasses behind a counter for twenty years for nothing! I knew the man the moment he showed his nose in the doorway, and a worse galoot than he is when he goes in to paint a town red don't exist. And that is the reason why I was mild and easy with him. He is a terror! I heerd of a fuss he got into down at Laredo once and he laid out three men, single-handed."

"He is a bloodthirsty rooster, don't you see,

and when he gits into a difficulty allers goes in for to kill his man!"

"A dangerous customer!" Gomes remarked.

"Yes, he is jest the man to keep clear of when he is on the rainpage!" the barkeeper declared.

"I suppose as the man is eager for a fight that he will be able to find some one to accommodate him in El Paso."

"I dunno," Billy Long responded with a dubious shake of the head. "Unless he strikes a stranger w'ot never heerd onto him I reckon he won't."

"I must take a look and see how he gets on," Gomes remarked and then the two Cubans followed the big cowboy.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ARRANGING THE TRAP.

WHAT do you think of this fellow?" Gomes asked, after he and his companion had reached the street.

"Just the man, I should imagine, to do the work which we want done," Esparto replied.

"So it appears to me; he is a bully and a desperado of the first water."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly; an entirely different man from the Frenchman."

"This fellow will not be apt to be troubled with any foolish notions in regard to fair play. If we approach him in the right way and make it an object for him to attack the Fresh, he will do his best in the matter without troubling his head as to whether he gives his man a fair chance for his life or not."

"Yes, and that is the kind of fellow we want. With such a man as the Fresh, it is not wise to stand upon ceremony," Esparto remarked.

"Decidedly not."

The pair were proceeding down the plaza in the direction of the United States Hotel, the cowboy having gone in that direction, and in the saloon of the hotel they found the stranger.

He had gone through the same performance as at the Hotel Mexico, and Big Jake, the proprietor of the saloon, who happened to be presiding over the bar, had been perfectly astounded when the rough fellow called for blood with as little ceremony as though the crimson fluid was on tap at every bar in El Paso.

The jolly Dutchman soon comprehended, though, what kind of a customer he had, and so exerted himself to be agreeable, as he did not want any trouble in his place.

But the cowboy was bent on war, and speedily expressed his opinion that there was not a man in the town of El Paso with "sand" enough to fight him.

But it was as the genial Billy Long of the Hotel Mexico had said, the cowboy was known, and if few of the "rounders" in the town had met him, nearly all knew by reputation of the Wild Bull of the Pecos, and the men who had neither met or heard of him, and who might have felt disposed to accept his challenge for the honor of the town, were deterred by the appearance of the boasting stranger.

Therefore the cowboy was no more successful in getting a man to quarrel with him in the second saloon than he had been in the first.

His disgust was great, and he did not hesitate to express it in the most emphatic tones.

The Cubans remained in the background, listening intently to the cowboy's blustering, and when he left the saloon they followed him into the street, being right on his heels.

After gaining the street, the cowboy hesitated for a moment, as though uncertain where to go, and Gomes improved the opportunity to address him.

"I think, stranger, that you are going to bluff the town," the Cuban remarked.

The cowboy took a good look at the two, and then, perceiving that they were gentlemen, and looked like foreigners, indulged in a good-natured grin.

"Wa-al now, durn my cats! ef it don't look that way!" he exclaimed.

"It certainly appears so," Gomes remarked. "And I must confess I am rather astonished at it, too, for I had an idea that El Paso boasted about its fighting men, but you certainly have backed them all down to-night."

"Wa-al, I reckon I did chip in pretty strong, and it is sart'in that I hasn't run across any one yet with sand enuff to take up my bluf, and I am mighty sorry 'bout it too, for I am jest yearning for a little fun. I ain't had a skirmish for 'bout a week and I am afeard I will git rusty if I don't scare up a fight with some one soon."

"I do not believe that you are likely to be accommodated," Esparto remarked. "The fact is the people of this town know you, and they are not anxious to run up against a cyclone."

Again the cowboy grinned, his vanity tickled by the compliment.

"I don't see how that kin be," he said. "How kin the sports of El Paso know me, seeing as how this is the fu'st time I ever struck the town?"

"They know you by reputation well enough," Gomes explained.

"Oh, yes, I see, and the moment I spit out my handle, the hull town dropped onto me. They had all heered of the Wild Bull of the Pecos, and were a leetle skeered to tackle him."

"Yes, that is almost the idea of it," Gomes remarked.

"Wa-al, r'ally, pard, I feel kinder sad 'bout this hyer matter," the big fellow remarked in a reflective sort of way. "If things — got to sich a pass that the moment I strike i strange town and spit out my handle all the boyees are going to fight shy of me, I won't be able to amuse myself at all."

"I think that is about the way the matter stands," Gomes observed.

"No doubt about it!" Esparto exclaimed. "Your reputation as a warrior is so great that all the fighting men in El Paso are afraid to meet you."

"Too bad! too bad!" the cowboy cried, with a melancholy shake of the head. "And do you r'ally reckon, sports, that thar isn't a man in El Paso with sand enough for to stand up for his town?"

"Well, now I come to think of it, there is one man who would be apt to give you a fight if you happened to run across him," Gomes replied after having apparently reflected over the matter for a few moments.

"Shol you don't say so!" cried the cowboy, delighted at the information.

"Yes, there is a man who would be pretty certain to take up your challenge," Gomes continued. "He is the big chief of El Paso, and no one has ever yet made him take water."

"That is jest the kind of a galoot that I am looking for!" exclaimed the big fellow. "I would not give two cents to back up ag'in' any common cuss; it is a big chief that I am a-hunting arter."

"Well, this man will certainly fill the bill, for so far he has got away with every fighter who has dared to face him."

"You are speaking of Blake, I suppose?" Esparto remarked at this point, speaking as though he had been puzzling over the identity of the party.

"Yes, he had a sword-fight with a Frenchman to-day and succeeded in laying out his man without any trouble," Gomes observed. And then he related the particulars of the fight, not forgetting to state that a good many of the El Pasoites expected that the Frenchman would prove the victor on account of his being an expert swordsman.

The cowboy shook his head.

"Durned if I would like any sword fight in mine!" he exclaimed.

"I reckon that this hyer Blake, as you call him, made a better show than I should, and from w'ot you say it 'pears to me that he must be a furst-class man."

"So El Paso thinks," Gomes replied.

"Perhaps it was just as well that you did not run across him to-day," Esparto suggested, shyly.

"Oh, come, none of that!" the big cowboy exclaimed. "Don't you try to poke any fun at me, 'cos I won't have it."

"I meant no offense I am sure," Esparto hastened to say.

"That is all right, pard, I ain't thin-skinned and kin take a joke as well as any man, as long as it ain't put on too thick. I ain't no frog-eater and ain't got no idee of fooling with toad-stickers; revolvers and bowie-knives are my we'pons and with them I don't fear no man w'ot walks on top of the airth. I am good for this hyer Blake, and I am jest hungry for to git at him. Whar does he hang out?"

"Oh, he does not live in El Paso, but on a ranch down the Rio Grande," Gomes replied.

"But you say he fit hyer in the bull-ring to-day?"

"Yes, that is true, but he is not in town now, having gone home," said the Cuban.

"Then I can't get at him?"

"Not until to-morrow."

"I will wait; you kin bet yer boots on that! But is he sart'in to be hyer to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes," Gomes replied, promptly, having made up his mind to devise some trick by means of which Blake could be lured to El Paso.

"Whar does he ginerally hang out when he is in town?"

"Well, the Hotel Mexico is usually his head-quarters."

"That's the shebang whar the tumbler-jugger fixed up that dandy drink for me, I reckon," the cowboy observed. "You kin bet yer boots it was hot, and it took hold all the way down."

"That is the Hotel Mexico," Gomes answered. "We were in there when you came in."

"And you think that it will be sart'in sure that this Blake will come to El Paso to-morrow?" the cowboy asked.

"Oh, yes, hardly a doubt about it."

"And he is counted the best man in El Paso?"

"Well, he has succeeded in getting away with every man who has tackled him so far; every one in the town will tell you that," Gomes replied.

"Oh, by long odds he is the biggest chief that El Paso can boast!" Esparto declared. "Ask anybody you like and they will tell you so; the champion of the town is this same Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, as he is called."

"Shol is that his handle?"

The Cubans nodded.

"Wa-al, I must say it is a right smart name

— a durned funny one too, the Fresh of 'Frisco," and the big cowboy repeated the name over, slowly. "Did you say this cuss had a ranch down the river?"

"Yes."

"But that 'ar handle sounds a mighty sight more like a sport than a rancher."

"That is what this man used to be, a regular gambling sharp, but now he is running a ranch."

"Tain't a good outlook, pard," the big fellow exclaimed, with a solemn shake of his big head. "Some of these gambler sports are the hardest kind of nuts to crack, but he is my mutton when I run across him."

"I reckon I will hang out at the Hotel Mexico myself, and then I will be sure to meet him; 'sides I am kinder hankering for another one of those dandy driunks. So-long, I'll see you ag'in?" And the cowboy started up the plaza, toward the Hotel Mexico.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE JEW'S WARNING.

THE Cubans strolled slowly along up the plaza, following in the footsteps of the cowboy, and watched him until he entered the saloon of the Hotel Mexico.

"So far so good!" exclaimed Gomes, exultingly. "He has taken the bait, and now his soul will know no peace until he has tested the prowess of the Fresh of 'Frisco."

"Yes; the train is laid, and all that is needed to fire it is the appearance of Jackson Blake in El Paso," Esparto observed. "But how is that matter to be arranged? The Fresh may not come to town for a week."

"I have thought of a plan; it came to me while I was talking with the cowboy, and that was why I assured him that Blake would be pretty certain to come to El Paso to-morrow."

"I see; you have a scheme in your mind to bring him here."

"Yes; and it will work, too, undoubtedly, if we can only get the old Jew pawnbroker to aid us."

"You can arrange that all right, if there isn't any risk and you pay the old rascal a good price for his trouble," Esparto remarked.

"We will see him at once and arrange the matter!" Gomes exclaimed.

Then the two proceeded to the abode of the old Jew.

They gained an entrance, after Solomons went through the usual ceremony of ascertaining who it was that applied for admission at his portal.

"Ab, my tear fr'ents, I am glad to see you," the pawnbroker remarked, as he ushered the visitors into his reception-room.

"I say, dot leetle job did not work yo-day, eh?" he continued, wagging his head in a knowing way.

"What job?" Gomes asked.

"Dot one you put up on der Fresh," replied the ancient Hebrew, with a wink. "Ab, it was a nice job, but it did not work. Oh, my tears, did I not tell you dot der Fresh ish a devil of a man?"

"Why should you think that we had anything to do with the matter?" Esparto asked.

"Oho, mine goot fr'ents, you must not think I have lived mid der world all this time for nothing!" the old Jew exclaimed. "Oh, no; I can smell der rat as far as the next man. Der moment I heard dot der Fresh was to fight mit swords in der bull-ring mit a stranger, I said to myself: 'Aha, mine Cuban fr'ents are at der bottom of dot!'"

"You are good at guessing," Gomes remarked.

"Oh, yesh; I am nobody's fool; all der boys will tell you dot," old Solomons replied, complacently.

"The Fresh certainly proved the victor," Gomes admitted.

"I tell you it ish no use for you to try to hurt dot man!" exclaimed the pawnbroker, shaking his head in a decided manner. "He ish a lucky mans; everything goes well mit him, and many years ago I found out that it ish not wise to attack one of dose lucky men: a man cannot make anything by a game like dot."

"Some so-called lucky men meet with terrible disasters once in a while," Esparto observed, tartly.

The old Jew took a good look from under his bushy eyebrows at the speaker, and then shook his head.

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish so," he replied. "Dot ish true, every word of it, but when dose lucky men meet mit a fall it is because their time has come; the men who hate them have nothing to do mit it."

"Then you think that this Jackson Blake is such a lucky man that we canot possibly harm him, no matter how carefully we arrange the scheme?" Gomes said.

The old Jew shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, perhaps I ought not to put der case as strong as that," the pawnbroker replied. "But if I was a betting mans, my goot fr'en's— which I am not—I would bet all mine monish on der Fresh."

"You are overrating the man!" Esparto exclaimed. "He certainly has been quite success-

ful since he has taken up his quarters in this section, but circumstances have favored him; it is the chance of fortune more than his own abilities he has to thank."

"Yesh, yesh, maybe," replied the Jew, again shrugging his shoulders as much as to say that he did not believe it. "It is hard work in such a matter to decide shust how der trick is done, but there is no mistake dot der Fresh has come out on der top of der heap, every time! Maybe it was all lu k, maybe not, but I can tell you one thing, mine good fr'en's, I will not buck against der Fresh of 'Frisco if I know mine- self."

Gomes laughed outright at this declaration.

"Why you laugh?" inquired the old Jew.

"You vant to make game of me, eh?"

"Oh, no, but the idea came into my mind that, if reports do not do you injustice, you are not the kind of man who bucks against anybody," the Cuban replied. "You always play a safe game; you remain in the background, and allow some one else to do the bucking."

The pawnbroker gave utterance to a low, cunning laugh.

"Vell, vell, my tear, I guess dot is der safest kind of game to play!" he exclaimed.

"You evidently believe so, for that is your rule always," Gomes remarked. "But now to come to business: there is a little service which we want you to do for us."

"Of course, mine goot fr'en's, I shall be glad to accommodate you."

"It is necessary for a certain purpose of ours to have the Fresh of 'Frisco come to El Paso to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, and as there is no prospect that he will come of his own accord, he must be brought here in some way."

"You got some nice leetle trap to spring on him when he does come, eh?" inquired the old Jew, in an extremely suspicious manner.

"There isn't any trap, as far as we are concerned," Gomes replied. "We have never taken any open stand against the Fresh, and we do not propose to begin now. The fact is, my dear Solomons, we are playing your game. We keep in the background, and allow some one else to do the work."

"If the Fresh comes to El Paso to-morrow, he will be apt to meet a man who thinks he can get away with him; it will all be just by accident, you understand."

The old Jew nodded sagely, and then chuckled, for a trick of this kind was exactly to his humor.

"Yesh, yesh, I see, and neither of you two will have anything to do mit it!"

"Certainly not!" Gomes declared. "We will probably be in the neighborhood, though, when the thing occurs, so as to see the fun."

"Ah, yesh, yesh, if der Fresh is in it there will be fun, you may sbust bet your life on dot!" the old Jew declared.

"The man of whom I speak is a stranger to El Paso, and has taken up his quarters at the Hotel Mexico; he is a cowboy, and flatters himself that he is a big chief; he has been informed that Jackson Blake is the best fighting man that this section can boast—the acknowledged champion of all this country adjacent to the Rio Grande—and he is eager to see if the Fresh is as good a man as rumor reports."

"Ab, yesh, dot is a nice scheme, and you have worked it beautifully," and the old Jew wagged his head in an approving manner.

"It ish all by accident, of course, dot this mans has heard of der Fresh, but, my goot fr'en's, you mark my words, dot devil of a Blake will get away mit him."

"He may and he may not, for this stranger is a tough customer," Gomes replied.

"He has been trying to have a fight eversince he struck the town," Esparto observed; "but his appearance is such that no one is willing to face him."

"Oho, dot was strange," the pawnbroker commented. "Who was he?"

"He is a cowboy, and he calls himself the Wild Bull of the Pecos," Gomes replied.

"Oh, yesh, yesh, I have heard of dot mans!" Solomons exclaimed. "You are right; he was a tough customer, but if I was a betting man I would bet on der Fresh."

"You are like the rest of the town," Gomes remarked, "because the Fresh has succeeded in coming out ahead two or three times, you have got the idea into your head that he is invincible."

"De proof of der pudding is in der eating," old Solomons replied with the air of a sage.

"Der Fresh has not been whipped yet."

"True, but that does not prove that he never will be," Gomes urged.

The pawnbroker was obliged to admit that this was true.

"But we are only wasting time in discussing the matter," Gomes continued. "The point we want to get at is this; Jackson Blake must be induced to come to El Paso to-morrow so that this cowboy will have a chance to get at him, and the affair must be so arranged that Blake will not suspect he has been led into a trap."

"Yesh, yesh, I see."

"Now if you can think of some plan to get

the Fresh here I will give you fifty dollars for the service."

The eyes of the old Jew sparkled, for it was not often that he had a chance to make fifty dollars so easily.

"Oh, yesh, I think I can do it—not so much for de monish as to oidle you, mine fr'en's," he remarked, rubbing his hands gleefully together and grinning at his visitors.

"You understand, mine goot sirs, dot in a business like this, I must be careful," he continued.

"Not for ten times fifty dollars would I have the Fresh know dot I had gone into any game against him—oh, mine gootness, no! He is shust der kind of fellow dot would lay a thing like dot up against a man."

"Yes, no doubt about that, but can't you fix the matter so it will seem to be all right?" Gomes inquired.

"Let me see!" and the ancient Hebrew cogitated for a few moments.

Then his face lit up with a cunning smile.

"Ah, yesh, yesh, I have it!" he exclaimed.

"There is a fr'en' of mine that has some cattle to sell sheep; I will send word to der Fresh to come right away to-morrow and meet me at the Hotel Mexico on important business."

"That will do if you select a good messenger, one who will make Blake believe that the business is important."

"Oh, leave me alone for dot; I will fix der trick right up to der handle?" the Jew declared.

And so the trap was laid which the conspirators confidently expected would catch Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FRESH WALKS INTO THE SNARE.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning; the Fresh had had his breakfast and had just returned from the corral where he had been to look at some new horses which had just come in, a recent purchase, when a youth whose features plainly betrayed that he was of the race of Jacob and Abraham, rode up.

Blake recognized the new-comer at a glance; it was the young Jew who acted as clerk to Hadad Solomons, and whom he had treated to such a fight on the occasion of his first visit to the pawnbroker's establishment as detailed in the story entitled "The Fresh on the Rio Grande."

"Hallo, what brings you down this way?" Blake asked.

The youth assumed a mysterious air and craved the favor of a private interview with the Fresh.

This being granted he proceeded to unfold his business, which was that his uncle, the pawnbroker, desired to see Mr. Blake in El Paso at the Hotel Mexico that morning, if possible, upon important business.

"What is the nature of the business?" the Fresh inquired.

The youth answered that he did not know, his uncle had not told him that, but he had been instructed to say it was most important, and that his uncle hoped Mr. Blake would be able to make it convenient to come.

The Fresh thought over the matter for a moment; he had not had any business dealings with the old Jew since his transaction with him just after his arrival in El Paso, and he was a little puzzled by the message, for he could not guess why the Jew wished to see him.

He concluded to go though and so informed the messenger.

"You can tell Mr. Solomons that I will be at the Hotel Mexico about noon," he said.

"Yes, sir," said the youth, "I will tell him," and then he rode away.

Old California Joe and Dave Ringwood happened to come up just at that moment and so overheard the speech.

"Did you hear what he wanted?" the Fresh asked of the pair, after the messenger took his departure.

"Yes, the old Jew is anxious to see you," Ringwood replied.

"And w'ot do you s'pose the durned old galoot is arter?" California Joe exclaimed.

"That is just what I am puzzling my brains about," Blake replied.

"It is mighty queer now, you bet," the old mountain man observed, "I reckon the Jew ain't no great friend of yours," the scout remarked.

"No, I reckon not. I succeeded in getting him into a trap, and skinned him once in a way he despised, and I fancy Solomons is a man with an extremely good memory, and if he ever got a good chance at me he would be apt to endeavor to get square."

"Oh, I reckon you are kinder barking up the wrong tree thar," Old California Joe observed, with a wise shake of the head. "You ain't so well acquainted with the old cuss as I am. I ain't a-disputing, mind you, that if he had a chance to git squar' with you, without showing his hand—without letting on, you know, that he was inter the thing at all, I don't doubt he would sail in for to skin yer as quick as a wink, but he is too durned skeered to go for you openly. He would be afraid you would git back at him sometime."

"I reckon California is talking good sound sense," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Yes, he is about right, I think," the Fresh coincided. "I do not believe the Jew has pluck enough to go for me openly, but if he got a chance to give me a dig without my being able to tell where it came from, the odds are big that he would be quick to improve the opportunity."

"On, yes, you bet!" Old California Joe exclaimed.

"The old Jew is the worst kind of a fraud," Dave Ringwood remarked. "Any one that knows him understands that. He hates you, of course, for you got the best of him, and in the deal succeeded in carrying off some of his shekels, and from what I know of the old scoundrel, he would as soon part with his flesh and blood as with his cash."

"Yes, yes, thar ain't no mistake 'bout that!" Old California Joe assented.

"It would only be natural under the circumstances, for the Jew to want to get square with you and so the moment I heard what was wanted, the idea immediately came to me that there might be some truth about the thing," Ringwood remarked.

"Yes, that notion came to me," the Fresh said. "And that was why I hesitated for a moment before I told the messenger that I would come. But, really, when you come to think over the matter it appears a little absurd to jump to such a conclusion, just because I know that the old Jew is no friend of mine."

If Solomons had sent me a message that he wanted to see me in some lonely and out-of-the-way place the suspicion might be reasonable that he was acting as the agent of some other party, and there was a plan on foot to get me at a disadvantage so that I might be attacked, but as the meeting-place is in the town of El Paso, that theory is not reasonable."

"The Jew is up to some game now, you kin bet your life!" Old California Joe declared, emphatically. "He is a prison galoot and I wouldn't trust him for a cent!"

The others laughed, for it was plain that the aged scout was decidedly prejudiced.

"Well, as far as I can see it does not matter much whether there is a game back of it or not," Blake remarked. "If there is one I reckon I will be strong enough to beat it. But I hardly think it is probable. We allow our suspicions to run away with us because we haven't a good opinion of the pawnbroker. To my mind the most probable solution of the mystery is that Solomons has struck some speculation which he is unable to handle for some reason, and he reckons that he might be able to rope me into it."

"I guess that is it," Dave Ringwood remarked.

But Old California Joe shook his head.

"I will allow that I am prejudiced as thunder ag'in' the mensley cuss!" he exclaimed. "And I kin jest tell you, boys, I have got a heap of reason for being in that ar' way; and, feeling as I do 'bout the ornery galoot, I can't get it out of my mind that thar ain't some gum game into the business."

"Well, speculation is idle," the Fresh remarked. "At noon I will know all about it. I hardly tbink the Jew would dare to do anything openly against me, but for fear there may be some game afoot, you two had better come with me."

The others thought this was a good idea, and so, in due time, the three started for the old Mexican city.

It lacked about ten minutes of noon when the party rode into the corral of the Hotel Mexico, and dismounted from their steeds.

Hadad Solomons was standing in front of the hotel as he rode by, and he nodded in the most friendly manner.

"Did you see the old galoot grin and rub his hands?" the old mountain-man asked. "Now I tell you w'ot it is—when that ar' old son of a gun goes on in that way it means that thar is mischief afoot."

"Oh, come now, California, you are putting it on a little too thick!" Blake exclaimed, laughing. "You are going on the old saying of give a dog a bad name and hang him."

"Durned if I wouldn't like to hang this old rogue of a Jew," the plainsman exclaimed.

"I will go on ahead, boys, and after I enter the hotel, you can saunter in," the Fresh remarked.

The others nodded, and Blake proceeded to the hotel.

Solomons was inside, and met him at the door.

"Ah, my tear fr'en', I vas delighted to see you," the Jew exclaimed, shaking hands with Blake as though he had not seen him for an age.

"Come, in a quiet corner we vill have some leetle business talk together," the old Jew continued, leading the way to the end of the saloon, remote from the bar, where there were no loungers.

"Sit down, mine fr'en', sit down, and we vill see if we cannot some leetle trade make."

"Ah, you are full of business, eh, as usual?" the Fresh remarked, as he accepted the proffered chair.

"Ah, yesh, mine goot sir, I must work all der while or else I would not be able to live, for times ish very hard," and the old Jew heaved a deep sigh, doing his best to look disconsolate.

"Nonsense! the times don't trouble you much!" the Fresh retorted. "The harder the times, the more money a man makes in a business like yours."

"No, no, no, dot ish not so!" the old Jew declared. "I know dot ish what peoples think and say, but my tear fr'en', they knows nothing about it at all."

"Yes, of course you will swear to that. Men of your race are never willing to acknowledge that they make anything. But what do you want to see me about?"

"You have a ranch?" and as he put the question the old Jew looked around him in a mysterious way as though he was afraid that there might be some one near, playing the spy upon them.

"Yes, I have a ranch," the Fresh replied, "but what are you looking around you in that queer way for? Everybody that knows anything about me knows that I have a ranch. There isn't any secret about it."

"Yesh, yesh, of course, but I likes to keep mine business to myself," the old man remarked. "On dot ranch you have cattle?" and Solomons dropped his voice almost to a whisper as he put the question.

"Of course, that is what ranches are for."

"How would you like to buy some nice cows, sheep?" inquired the pawnbroker in the most cautious manner.

"Where are they?"

"On der Mexican side of the Rio Grande."

"Do they belong to you?"

"Oh, no, I am shust offering them for a fr'en'."

"Why didn't you have them brought up to the town and offered at open sale?"

"No, no, my fr'en' would rather sell them to some rancher down der river."

"Something crooked about the matter, eh?"

"Oh, I guess not, my fr'en' is an honest man, but when der beevens are on der American side of der Rio Grande it will be all right, and you can buy them for about half what they are really worth."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COWBOY AGAIN.

By this time the Fresh fancied that he fully understood the game.

The cows were stolen ones; they had been "lifted" from the Mexican ranches in the interior and driven to the bank of the Rio Grande with the idea of selling them to the ranchers on the American side, and once the beevens were on Texan soil, it would be a difficult matter for the rightful owners to trace them.

Now, although Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, was by no means a saint, yet he was not the man to allow himself to be mixed up in any affair of this kind, and be lost no time in letting the old Jew understand as much.

"My dear Mr. Solomons," he said, "this speculation which you propose is not one that I care to go into."

"Why not?" exclaimed the pawnbroker, pretending to be much astonished. "You can much monish make out of der trade. These cows can be bought for cash for one-half of what they are worth. You see my fr'en' is in a burry to sell, and he wants his monish right down so he can go away, and I thought of you, for I knew dot you would be likely to have der hard cash."

"Oh, no, I don't care to trade," Blake replied decidedly. "There is something crooked about this transaction, of course, or else your man would not be eager to get rid of the cows at a sacrifice. I reckon your man did not come by them honestly."

"Oh, I think he ish a goot man!" the Jew persisted. "Many years have I known him, and never did I hear dot he was in trouble."

"Yes, I suppose he has always been smart enough to keep in the background and get others to do the work for him; but be that as it may, I do not care to trade," and the Fresh rose to his feet in order to signify that the interview was at an end.

The Jew rose also.

"Vell, vell, my goot fr'en', I am sorry dot you will not trade," and then he continued in his smooth, insinuating way: "I hope, Mister Blake, dot you will keep this matter quiet—dot you will not speak about it?"

"Oh, that is all right; don't trouble your head about that. I am not in the habit of betraying any confidence that is reposed in me," the Fresh answered.

"I am so much obliged," bowed the Jew. "Be sure, Mister Blake, dot I will do as much for you some time. Will you have a drink mit me, Mister Blake?"

"Well, I don't mind a glass of ale," the Fresh replied.

The two advanced to the bar; the Jew called for two glasses of ale, and as the order was being filled, the door of the saloon was thrown open and into the saloon stalked the cowboy who called himself the Wild Bull of the Pecos.

The manner of the man's entrance attracted the attention of every one in the room, and as

the Jew and Blake tured to see who it was they encountered the gaze of the new-comer, who had halted half-way between the door and the bar.

The moment the cowboy saw that he had attracted the attention of the Fresh, he cried out in a loud voice:

"Iyer am I, the king of the cowboys, the eternal, lightning terror of the airth, the cavorting, snorting Wild Bull of the Pecos, the best man to-day that thar is in this town of El Paso, bar none!"

As the reader who has followed the fortunes of the Fresh of 'Frisco knows, Jackson Blake was remarkably quick-witted; he was no man's fool, and when he heard the boasting words of the stranger—saw the fellow glare at him, and comprehended that the speech was addressed more to him than to any one else in the room, the thought instantly came to him that it was for the purpose of giving this big stranger a chance at him that he had been brought to El Paso.

"Aha, you have put up a job on me, eh?" he said in an undertone to the Jew, much to the latter's astonishment and disgust.

"So help me Moses, I did not," the pawn-broker protested, with trembling accents. "I assure you, Mister Blake, I know nothing about it."

"I'm the best man in this town, I say!" repeated the cowboy, finding that the Fresh did not take any notice of his speech.

"The best man in El Paso, you bet! and the man who says I am not will have to peel and wade in! I am the cowboy fighter and I kin chaw up and drag out every thing from a grizzly b'ar downwards, and if thar is any man in this stebang who thinks he is a chief, you kin jest bet all you air worth that I will take his scalp in mighty quick order."

"Say, mebbe you would like to have a leetle fun with me?" he continued addressing his conversation directly to Blake.

"Well, maybe I would," the Fresh replied. "Perhaps I am the man you are looking for."

"I reckon you ar' if you are game for a fight!" the big fellow replied. "I am arter the best man in this hyer town of El Paso, and I calculate to take his hide!"

"If you can, stranger; always put that in, because sometimes these leetle things don't always work as smoothly as they might."

"I reckon I kin take the spine out of you and not half try!" cried the cowboy in contempt, for he, like many another who had been led to attack the sport, made the mistake of thinking that the Fresh of 'Frisco was not up to the champion form, Blake being one of those deceptive men who did not look when dressed in the garb of civilization to be anywhere near as big as he really was.

He was so well-proportioned that his real size was disguised.

At this point Goldberg, the landlord of the Hotel Mexico, came rushing into the room; he had been warned by one of the hotel attendants that the big cowboy was in the saloon on the rampage and there was a prospect of a row.

The moment he heard this intelligence the hotel-keeper immediately became alarmed for the safety of his property and at once hurried to the scene of action.

"What is the matter, my friends? don't have any trouble in here!" he cried.

Bitter experience had taught the proprietor of the Hotel Mexico that a personal quarrel in a saloon usually wound up in a free fight, and generally resulted in much damage to the personal property of the saloon-keeper.

"Oh, no, we ain't going to have the least bit of trouble!" the cowboy responded. "I am just going to smash this hyer Fresh of 'Frisco duck for all I am worth!"

"Oho! you know who I am, and yet I don't remember ever being introduced to you!" Blake exclaimed.

"Gentlemen, I beg that you will not fight here!" Goldberg cried. "Go out into the street—there you will have plenty of room, while here you will not."

"Don't you worry now!" the cowboy replied. "I don't need much room to finish up sich a whipper-snapper as this galoot!" And the big fellow brandished his huge arms in the air as he spoke.

He was such a big, overgrown piece of humanity that it did not really seem as if the Fresh stood much chance in a contest with him.

"You don't understand this rifle, Goldberg," the Fresh remarked. "This fight is all over now excepting the shouting—that is what this big chief thinks."

"Wa-al, now, you kin bet 'bout all you ar' worth that that is about the size of it!" the cowboy cried. "You hain't got conceit enuff now, have ye, to reckon that you kin stand up ag'in' me more'n a minit? Sho! one good crack will settle you, and I don't believe I will have to more than half-try either."

"Oh, my dear friends, let me beg of you not to fight here!" Goldberg cried. And then a brilliant idea came to him.

"I tell you what it is!" he continued. "As long as you are going to fight why not have the contest take place in the bull-ring? There you

will have plenty of room while here there is not. You can have the bull-ring and welcome! I will not charge you anything for it."

This idea struck the cowboy favorably.

"Fight into the bull-ring, hey?" he cried. "Wa-al, I reckon that is a mighty good notion, although arter we git at it you kin jest be safe in betting yer bottom dollar that thar won't be much of a fight, for it won't take long for a man of my size, a reg'lar, ranting, snorting big chief, to lay out any Jack-a-dandy chap!"

"It is a good idea for you to go ahead and blow now!" Blake remarked, "for after the fight you may not feel like it."

"Why, I won't make more'n a mouthful of you!" the cowboy declared.

"Come along, if you mean business, 'cos I am in a hurry to hammer a leetle sense into you!"

"Go ahead, Goldberg, and open the bull-ring!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I am a little anxious myself to come to the hammering part so as to understand how it feels."

"Yes, yes, come on, I am glad to be able to oblige you, gentlemen," Goldberg declared.

And then all within the saloon filed out into the street with the exception of the bar-keeper, genial Billy Long, who was obliged to stay, in order to look after the place, much to his disgust.

"I would give a five-dollar gold-piece to see the fight!" he declared.

"That big galoot thinks he has got a soft thing, but if I was betting ducats on the fight, I would back the Fresh of 'Frisco every time!"

Goldberg led the way to the bull-ring, the big cowboy marching by his side as proudly as though he owned the whole town.

Behind him came the Fresh and his pards, Dave Ringwood and Old California Joe, then the Jew, and the men who had happened to be in the saloon at the time when the cowboy made his entrance.

At the tail end of the procession were the two Cubans.

They had been on the street, gazing through one of the side windows into the saloon, watching the progress of the affair, and though they were rather disappointed because the cowboy had not brought on the conflict immediately, yet they consoled themselves with the thought that in the bull-ring no one was likely to interfere with the fight.

The people who chanced to be on the street were attracted by the procession, and upon learning what was going on, immediately followed, so by the time the bull-ring was reached there was quite a crowd.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

GOLDBERG unlocked the small door which led into the bull-ring, admitted the crowd, and then securely fastened it again, for, as he remarked, it was not necessary that the whole town should be present to witness the performance.

It really grieved the soul of the thrifty hotel-keeper when he reflected that quite a nice little sum of money could be gathered from the crowd if he could charge them for going into the bull-ring, and he had half a mind to declare that he could not afford to allow the crowd to come in without paying; but when he came to take a look at the "gang," the conclusion was forced upon him that they would not stand it; some of the toughest customers in El Paso were present, and as they never were known to have any more money than they knew what to do with, any attempt to make them pay for the privilege of seeing the fight would undoubtedly raise the biggest kind of a row.

The landlord was determined, though, that no more should get in, and so he was careful to lock the door.

The cowboy strode out to the middle of the bull-ring, and, wheeling around, threw himself in a fighting position.

"Hyer I am, all of me!" he exclaimed, defiantly. "The best man that you kin scare up to-day in this hyer old town, or, for that matter, I will throw in up and down the Rio Grande, all along for a hundred miles; yes, and the bull durned State of Texas! I am the best man in the Southwest, and I don't keer who knows it!"

"Stranger, you blow the loudest horn that has been heard for many a day in El Paso, and I really hope you do amount to something as a fighter, for it would be a dreadful disappointment to all of us if you should turn out to be only a gas-bag," the Fresh observed.

"Come up to the scratch and I will soon show you what kind of a gas-bag I am," the cowboy exclaimed, brandishing his long arms and beginning to prance around.

"What sort of a fight do you want—a good square fisticuff match?"

"Yes, sir-ee, that is w'ot I am arter!" exclaimed the cowboy, and he dashed the big, fawn-colored slouch hat which he wore to the ground.

"Thar's my tile into the ring," he continued, and then he commenced to roll up his shirt-sleeves. "Come, now, don't waste any more time in talk; peel and wade in!"

As the cowboy wore no coat, all he had to do

to prepare for the contest was to remove his hat and roll up his sleeves.

The Fresh was obliged to remove his coat, which he immediately proceeded to do, and then he took off his hat and rolled up his sleeves.

The cowboy was watching him, and an expression of astonishment appeared on his face when he saw the unusual muscular development of his antagonist.

During the forenoon he had made some inquiries about the Fresh, and all with whom he had spoken had assured him that Jackson Blake was as good a man as had ever struck El Paso; but when he came face to face with the Fresh, because he did not find him to be a great, overgrown fellow, he fell into the error of thinking El Paso overrated the man.

Then the idea occurred to him that the quiet-looking, gentlemanly-appearing fellow was a sharp who had won his renown by his skill with weapons, and this was why he desired a fist-fight.

But now that the Fresh had "peeled" off his coat, to the surprise of his opponent, he appeared to be bigger than when he had it on.

"He is a better man than I reckoned he was," the big fellow muttered to himself, "but I will smash him into bits though, all the same."

"Now then, stranger, I am ready for you!" the Fresh observed, as he finished his preparations and advanced toward his opponent. "Sail in as soon as you like!"

"Look out for yourself, for thar's a cyclone coming!" the cowboy howled, and then he made a ferocious rush at the Fresh, striking wickedly with both right and left.

The blows were ferocious ones, and most surely would have damaged the handsome face of the Fresh of 'Frisco materially if they had fallen where the cowboy intended, but Jackson Blake was too good a boxer to be made a chopping-block by any such clumsy fellow as the Wild Bull of the Pecos.

He gave way as the other advanced—dodged some blows, parried others, and then, watching his opportunity, slipped under the right arm of his opponent.

The cowboy wheeled about to renew the attack, and as he did so the Fresh caught him under the ear with a terrific blow, which sent him reeling to the ground.

The big fellow came down heavily, but although he was dazed by the shock he was on his feet again in a second, and made another rush at his nimble foe.

The Fresh of 'Frisco did not give an inch this time, but met the onset with a straight right-hander, which landed between the cowboy's eyes and brought him to a dead halt.

Then, almost befor the cowboy could realize what had happened, the Fresh "measured" his man and sent in a left-hander, which caught the cowboy on the throat, full on the jugular vein, and over again went the big fellow.

A shout went up on the air from the lips of the crowd; it was impossible for them to keep quiet, for it was not once a year that such a rare show as this could be seen in the town of El Paso.

The cowboy was completely exhausted, as much by the exertion which he had made as by the punishment he had received, while the Fresh showed few signs of the efforts he had put forth.

"I reckon that this may be called the end of round number one," he remarked. "We kinder rusbed into this thing without making the usual arrangements; but we ought to have seconds to attend to us, and if a couple of you gentlemen will look after this stranger, my pards, Dave Ringwood and Old California Joe, will attend to me."

Although the stranger had made no friends by his actions, yet a couple of the lookers-on volunteered to act as his seconds in the interest of fair play.

The two were new men in El Paso, being a couple of cowboys who had come up from the Rio Grande, Tom Bunker and Ben Rockford by name.

"Me and my pard hyer will look arter him, seeing that he is in the same line of business that we foller for a living!" Tom Bunker, the elder of the two explained.

"Yes, we are cow-punchers, and we will do what we kin for him," the other added.

"Yes, and I reckon, Goldberg, you had better act as referee, for we need some one to engineer the picnic," the Fresh suggested.

"Certainly, I shall be glad to assist," responded the landlord, whose "sporting blood" had been heated by the contest.

Then the seconds hurried to bring chairs for their principals.

Blake seated himself and the two cowboys assisted the big fellow into his chair.

Tom Bunker had acted as a second before, and so he took it upon himself to give the Wild Bull of the Pecos some advice.

"You have got a tough customer to handle in this hyer jig," he remarked, "and you don't want to go to work to throw no chances away. You want to kinder spar and keep away—try and counter him, for if you once get a fair crack you ought to be able to damage him."

"I have been in a heap of fights in my time,

but I never ran across such a galoot as this hyer before," the cowboy complained. "The cuss dodges 'round like a dancing Jack and I don't git no chance at him. If he would only stand up, fair and square, so I could smash him, I reckon that two or three good hits would settle his hash."

"Yes, but he is a reg'lar scientific boxer," the other remarked. "And though I have seen a mighty big heap of good men in my time, I reckon this fellow is top of them all. You mustn't expose yourself by rushing at him, 'cos that gives him a chance to get in his fine work. You want to kinder hold off and not give no points away."

"The galoot hits 'bout as hard as a mule kin kick," the cowboy growled. "Durn me if I ever run up ag'in such a fighter afore!"

During the wait the Fresh improved the opportunity to exchange a few words with his pards.

"The Cubans are here, I see," Blake remarked.

"Yes, I spotted them," Dave Ringwood replied.

"You kin bet all your ducats that them two pisoned yaller cusses ar' at the bottom of this hyer business," the old mountain-man asserted.

"California wa' right about the Jew's request," the Fresh observed. "It was a trick to lure me to El Paso so that this big ruffian could pick a quarrel with me."

"Yes, there isn't any doubt in my mind about that," Dave Ringwood observed. "And we must give Old Joe credit for being sharper than we were."

"Wa-al, boyees, I have lived in this hyer world a few years longer than either of you, and I have dealt so much with these Greasers that I have got to know 'em like a book," the old fellow replied. "Trickery is their best holt, and I reckon if they hated a man and had a chance to wipe him out, and could strike him either in the back or front, that they would go for his back every time!"

"The little scheme will not work though," Dave Ringwood remarked. "You are going to punish this fellow without any trouble."

"Yes, but I fancy that after I hammer him a little more he will get sick of it and go for his shooting-irons."

"Wa-al, if he does, I reckon he won't ketch you napping," the old scut observed with a dry chuckle.

"I fancy not," Blake replied.

The Cubans had also seized upon this opportunity to hold a brief conversation.

"That fellow is making a fine show of himself!" Gomes exclaimed, his face dark and his voice hoarse with suppressed rage.

"He is about as fit to contend with this Fresh of 'Frisco as a hawk would be to wage war with an eagle," Esparto replied, contemptuously.

"Yes, that is the truth, but when this cowboy finds that he stands no chance to fight Blake with his fists he may resort to his weapons."

"And in that case I fancy he will find that Jack is as good as his master!" Esparto rejoined.

"Ab, my dear fellow, we are wasting time, and the quicker we organize the Red Riders of Rayon again the better."

"Time, gentlemen!" exclaimed the hotel-keeper at this point.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE END OF THE STRUGGLE.

GOLDBERG was not well posted in regard to the rules of a contest of this sort, and was not sure as to how long a time should be allowed between the rounds, and when he appealed to some of the bystanders in regard to this point he found that there was a decided difference of opinion about it.

Some thought five minutes was the proper time, others maintained that it was only two, and a few declared that it was neither two nor five, but three; and then there was as great a difference of opinion in regard to whose rules should regulate the fight, the "London prize ring" or the "Marquis of Queensberry," and the discussion became so heated that it pretty nearly resulted in a free fight.

Goldberg settled the matter though, by declaring that in his opinion five minutes was a short enough time for men to be allowed to recover from such vigorous exercise; at the same time remarking that he did not pretend to settle the dispute by assuming that it was correct and according to the rules.

The rising of the men to renew the battle put an end to the dispute.

Although owing to the wrangle the wait had been nearly seven minutes, yet the big cowboy had not recovered from the effects of the last round, but was still decidedly short of breath when he faced his opponent.

The Wild Bull of the Pecos could not be set down for a good-looking man at any time, and now that his features were discolored and bruised, the result of the awful "facer" he had received, he was about as ugly-looking as any man that had ever trodden the streets of El Paso.

"Say, why don't you stand still and fight like

a man?" the big fellow growled, as he squared off at his opponent.

"Oh, you don't like my style of fighting?" the Fresh inquired, with a sarcastic smile.

"No, I don't!"

"Well, that isn't anything remarkable. I never fought a man yet who did."

"I don't believe in no hopping 'round like a b'ar with a sore ear."

"You want me to stand quietly, eh?"

"Yes, that is the way to fight—no dancing-Jack business."

"I am quiet now—go for me!"

The cowboy accepted the invitation and aimed a terrific blow at the head of the Fresh.

Blake parried the stroke without any trouble, then "feinted" with his left at the cowboy's face.

Up went the arms of the big fellow to ward off the blow, thus leaving his chest unguarded, which was exactly what the Fresh of 'Frisco was after, for out shot his powerful right arm, landing on the breast of the cowboy directly over his heart, and down to the ground again tumbled the Wild Bull of the Pecos.

Again the bystanders yelled, but one disgusted citizen, who had been foolish enough before the fight to bet five dollars on the cowboy, pinning his faith on the stranger being so much the bigger man of the two, and who, after the first round, had been vainly endeavoring to save his money by offering to bet heavy odds on the Fresh, now could not help roaring the discontent which filled his soul.

"Oh, take that big stuff away and plant him somewhar! He is only fit for dog meat!"

This exclamation was followed by a shout of laughter, which galled the cowboy to the soul.

His seconds had run to his assistance and helped him to his feet.

He was now thoroughly enraged and perfectly satisfied that in a boxing contest he stood no chance at all with his opponent.

"I don't want no more of this infernal boxing!" he roared at the top of his lungs. "I am a fighter, I am, a man who ain't afraid to wade in blood!"

"Say, you ornery galoot, do you dare to pull out yer revolver and fight me like a man?"

And as he spoke the cowboy clapped his hand on his weapon.

"I am your man, sir, in any way you choose to take me!" the Fresh replied.

"Hold on, gentlemen, give us a chance to get out of the way!" the landlord cried. "I want you to understand that there is no one here who is anxious to stop a bullet!"

"We will back to the edge of the ring so as to have a fair field and you gentlemen can get into the seats where you will be out of harm's way," the Fresh suggested.

"That's the ticket!" cried the cowboy. "All I ask is a fair show for my money!"

"Oh, you will get that, stranger!" Goldberg declared. "We men of El Paso pride ourselves upon giving a fair shake to everybody, and it don't make a bit of difference whether they belong to the town or not."

"Yes, yes, that's so!" cried half a dozen voices.

"Back to your places, gentlemen, and I will give the word for the thing to begin!" the landlord exclaimed.

"All right! that suits me!" the cowboy cried. "And I want you to understand, you Mister Fresh of 'Frisco, that I am going for your scalp this time, red-hot! and you had better believe that I am going to get it, too!"

"If you can, don't forget that!" responded Jackson Blake. "Always put that in, and then you will be sure not to make a bad break."

"You may be a dandy boxer, but you will find that I am the champion revolver shot!" the cowboy boasted.

"You will be able to give me a few points, then, in the shooting line," Blake remarked.

"You won't need any points arter this fight is ended, for you will be dead!" the big cowboy snarled.

"Say! don't bury me alive, you know," the Fresh retorted. "Be quite sure that I am dead before you go to plant me."

"Oh, don't you worry 'bout that!" the other exclaimed. "You will be dead enough when I get through with you, dead for keeps, too! You had the best on it in this hyer fist fight, but when it comes to guns, you kin jest bet all the rocks you kin scare up that I am the boss, and no mistake!"

"The boss blower, and no mistake about that!" the Fresh exclaimed. "There has been some big braggarts in El Paso before you struck the town, but you lay over all of them—you take the cake, beyond a doubt!"

"You won't talk so big arter we git through with this skirmish!" the cowboy declared.

"And most assuredly you will not!" Jackson Blake replied, his voice deepening and a stern look appearing on his face.

"As a rule, when I get into an affair of this sort I do not care to badly hurt my man, because I am not naturally bloodthirsty, but in your case I reckon I shall have to give you a lesson that will be apt to last you for some time," the Fresh continued.

"Oh, yes, I reckon you will if you kin!"

sneered the cowboy. "You oughter think of w'ot you said a spell ago, if you kin, you know!"

"That question will soon be settled," Blake replied. "And I reckon that you will not admire the settlement either. But there is one point that I want to touch on. You are a stranger here, and yet you have picked a quarrel with me without any reason whatever, for I never had any trouble with you in any way!"

"Wa-al, I'm a big chief, I am, and when I struck El Paso, I calculated to run the town!" exclaimed the cowboy, "but I heered that you were the biggest warrior in the burg, and as I didn't think the town was big enough to hold both on us, I made up my mind to find out to one's which was the best man of us two."

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I know the game that is being played just as well as though I had a hand in forming the scheme myself. You were put up to attack me, and the men behind you are cowardly curs who do not dare to come out and face me openly, but as I am getting sick of this sort of thing, I will hunt them out of their holes before long and make them show their colors."

This speech made the bystanders cast inquiring glances at each other.

By this time all the people in the inclosure, with the exception of the duelists, had got out of the bull-ring, and were bunched together on the seats at one side of the circle.

The Cubans were in the background, rather keeping behind the others so as to escape observation, and when this speech of the Fresh, so unexpectedly delivered, reached their ears, they exchanged meaning glances.

"The fellow has smelt out the trap," Gomes whispered in Esparto's ear.

"Yes; I am not surprised at it, either, for he is wonderfully quick-witted."

"We must look out for ourselves, for now that his suspicions are aroused he will be apt to try to find the principals whose agents are attacking him—that is, if the cowboy does not succeed in laying him out."

"It is a hundred ounces to one that he will get the best of this big braggart as easily with the weapons as with his fist," Esparto replied in a tone of conviction.

"Now, gentlemen, are you all ready?" Goldberg asked.

The duelists were at the extreme edge of the ring, on opposite sides, facing each other, their backs being against the railing which was intended to keep the bulls from leaving the ring.

"All ready," replied the Fresh of 'Frisco.

"Oh, yes, you bet!" cried the cowboy.

"How are you going to run this thing?" the landlord asked.

"Why, I am going to kill this ornery galoot as dead as a door-nail!" the cowboy exclaimed.

"The gentleman means, I presume, that it is to be a duel to the death," Blake remarked.

"That is it! Now you hit me whar I live!" cried the other.

"All right; I will count three and then you go it!" said the landlord.

The duelists nodded.

Their revolvers were out—their eyes intently fixed upon each other.

"One, two, three, go!" cried Goldberg.

Hardly had the last word escaped his lips when up came the revolvers, but the Fresh being the quicker shot anticipated the fire of the other.

With a howl of pain the cowboy dropped his weapon.

Blake had put a ball through his right shoulder.

"I kin shoot with my left hand!" the cowboy yelled, and he plucked out another pistol.

Again the Fresh's revolver spoke and another yell of pain came from the rough fellow.

Jackson Blake had shot him through the left shoulder.

I reckon you will not trouble anybody now for some time!" the Fresh remarked.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN UNSUCCESSFUL QUEST.

THE fight was over, and as nearly all the spectators had anticipated, the Fresh of 'Frisco had proven an easy winner.

One of the doctors of the town happened to be among the spectators and he hurried to the assistance of the cowboy.

The Wild Bull of the Pecos was completely disgusted; the fight was taken out of him, and all he desired was to get out of El Paso as soon as possible.

And, as it happened, there was a teamster present who was bound down the river and he volunteered to give the cowboy a passage, and so the Wild Bull of the Pecos took his departure.

He had come for wool and returned shorn.

After the duel, Dave Ringwood and Old California Joe hastened to congratulate Blake on his victory.

"This second trap did not succeed in catching you any better than the first," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"This fellow was not as dangerous as the other," the Fresh replied.

"You didn't g'r'n the galoot much chance in

this hyer fight to show whether he could do anything with a pistol or not," the old mountain-man observed with a chuckle.

"I did not intend to take any chances," Blake replied. "Of course I had no knowledge of whether he was a dead-shot or not, but from the way he carried himself I got the idea that he might be a pretty fair marksman. The cowboys pride themselves upon their shooting abilities, and the most of them are good shots, but my experience with all these big men is that they are slow on the trigger—apt to putter over their aim—"

"That is so, sure as ye'r born!" cried Old California Joe, "I have noticed it a hundred times!"

"Yes, it is true," Dave Ringwood assented.

"So I made up my mind not to give him any chance to show whether he could shoot or not, but to plug him before he could fire."

By this time the Fresh had attired himself for the street again, and the conversation was interrupted by the spectators who came to congratulate the Fresh upon his victory.

Blake was on the watch for the Cubans and the Jew, but neither one of the three was visible.

In company with the others the Fresh returned to the Hotel Mexico, but under pretense of having some business to which he must give his attention, Blake and his pards got away from the enthusiastic crowd.

"Where now?" asked Dave Ringwood, when the three were on the plaza.

"To the old Jew's," was Blake's reply. "The old rascal was a party to this scheme and I intend to bring him to book for it."

"Yes, and it will serve him right too, the measley galoot!" Old California Joe declared. "Old Solomons is as tough a cuss as ever walked in shoe-leather. I have met with many a Jew in my time, and when they get inter the frontiers of civilization and go inter the pawn-broker business they are wolves, all of them, but this aged cuss is the boss wolf of the crowd!"

"Well, I am going to find out who was at the back of this business to-day?" the Fresh declared. "For in my mind there isn't any doubt that Solomons was hired to get me to come to El Paso so this cowboy would have a chance to attack me. I suspect the Cubans are at the bottom of it, and if so I intend to call them to a speedy reckoning."

"S'pose the old Jew will not give the snap away?" Dave Ringwood asked.

"Oh, I shall adopt such a *persuasive* way that I do not think he will be able to refuse," Blake replied with a smile.

The old mountain-man grinned.

"I reckon that if I had the working of the trick I would make the old galoot spit out w'ot he knows 'bout the affair, or I would put him through a course of sprouts w'ot would be apt to take the curl out of his hair!" Old California Joe declared.

"Well, it is about time that you found out something about it," Dave Ringwood remarked. "It is not pleasant for a man to reflect that he has some secret foe who is ready to strike him at any convenient opportunity."

"I will wring the truth out of the old Jew as sure as my name is Jackson Blake!" the Fresh declared. "I think that the Cubans are at the bottom of the mischief, as I said before, and if the Jew implicates them, as I believe he will, this town of El Paso will not be big enough to hold the pair and a man about my size."

By this time the three had arrived at the domicile of Hadad Solomons.

The house was tightly closed as usual, but in answer to Blake's loud rap the panel in the door opened, but instead of the Jew, the face of his assistant appeared.

"Open locks! I want to see Mr. Solomons!" Blake declared.

"He is not here," the youth answered.

"Not in the house?"

"No, sir."

"When will he be in?"

"I do not know; he has been called out of town on business."

"Oh, well, you will do. I suppose you can fix my business all right."

"I do no business until Mister Solomons returns. Good-by!" and then the youth shut the wicket.

"Euchered, by thunder!" cried the old mountain-man.

"I say, you didn't get much satisfaction out of him!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed.

"Oh, but I am not going to be put off in this way!" the sport rejoined. And then with the knocker he awoke the echoes of the street.

No answer was made to the summons though.

"He knows who it is, and he don't calculate to hold no more talk with you," Old California Joe remarked.

"Oh, I tell yer it is just as I said—this hyer Jew is a p'ison galoot!"

"Whether he is in or not, he is determined not to see you," Dave Ringwood observed.

"Conscious guilt, pards, that is what it is," Blake declared. "If he hadn't something on his mind he would not hesitate to see me, but I am going to get in if I can!"

And again the Fresh banged away at the knocker, and this time he raised such a racket that he alarmed all the neighborhood.

Men, women and children appeared at various doors and windows, peering cautiously out into the street, and many of them were armed with various things in the shape of weapons, in the alarm of fear caught up, more or less offensive, ranging from fire-arms down to brooms, pokers, and big sticks.

"Kinder looks from this display as if the inhabitants of this hyer street imagined the wild Injuns had made a raid on El Paso," the old mountain-man remarked.

"Yes, and I hope that these good people will not take into their heads to sally out and attack us," Dave Ringwood observed. "I will be hanged if I want to fight a Mexican mob!"

"Well, it would be rather ugly," Blake rejoined.

But the ferocious attack on the knocker produced the desired result.

Again the panel opened, and the face of the boy appeared, this time pale with fright.

"My good sir, do you want to tear the house down?" the youth exclaimed.

"Oh, no! no idea of doing anything of that kind," the Fresh answered. "But I do not like to be treated in a shabby manner. Here we are come to do business with you, and you will not let us in."

"Did I not tell you that Mister Solomons was not at home?" the youth exclaimed. "It would not be of any use to let you in; I could not do any business with you."

"Have you not made some mistake about the matter?" Blake asked, in his softest and most insinuating way.

"No, no; no mistake!"

"Oh, but it may be possible, you know, that your master is in the house somewhere and you not know it," the Fresh persisted.

"My good sir, I assure you he is not in," the youth answered.

"But it would not do any harm if you were to go and take another look," Blake said, persuasively. "And just tell him, you know, that his very good friend, Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, is here, and is anxious to transact a little business with him. And if he is in the house I feel sure he will see me; he might as well, you know, first as last, for he will have to see me some time, for if I make up my mind to that, there is no corner of this earth, far enough off, or so obscure, in which he can hide, that I will not find him," and the tone of the Fresh deepened, while his eyes flashed in such a way that the Jewish youth fairly shook in his shoes.

"You just hunt him up, and tell him this, and I am sure he will see me—just try now," continued Jackson Blake, with an abrupt change in his tone to the soft, wheedling manner again.

"Oh, my good sir, I am telling you the truth!" the youth protested. "Mister Solomons is not here; he left the house about a quarter of an hour ago, and he will not be back for two or three weeks."

"Ah, indeed?" the Fresh exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, it is the truth. He has gone on a journey."

"Not on foot?"

"Oh, no, sir, on horseback. He has business at — and some other towns in that direction and he expected when he left to be away for some time."

"Has he taken the direct road to —?" Blake asked, carelessly.

"Indeed, sir, I do not know. He has business up the river and down the river, and whether he intends to go up or down the Rio Grande before he goes to — or after he comes back is more than I can tell."

"So, he is likely to have gone in any one of the three directions?" the Fresh remarked, musingly.

"Yes, sir, but for the life of me I couldn't tell you which one of the three is the most likely one."

Blake appeared to be buried in meditation for a moment just as though he was debating the matter over in his mind, then observed, abruptly:

"The odds are big that he has gone straight to — for he would be apt to attend to his business in the river towns on his return, and as he has only a few minutes' start, if we set out at once we may overtake him. Much obliged for the information; so-long!"

And then the Americans took their departure, greatly to the relief of the inhabitants of the street, the most of whom had recognized the Fresh of 'Frisco, whom in their heart of hearts they believed to be a lunatic.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BRINGING THE JEW TO AN ACCOUNT.

Not a word was said by any of the three until they turned into the plaza; then Old California Joe put the question:

"Whar are we bound?"

"To the corral," Blake answered.

"Arter our bosses?"

"Exactly."

"And do you reckon to make an attempt to overtake this p'izen galoot of a Jew?" the old mountain-man asked, evidently amazed.

"Of course! As he only has fifteen minutes' start, we can do it easily enough, if we only have the luck to strike the right road."

"But I say, Blake, you don't take any stock in this boy's yarn, do you?" Dave Ringwood inquired.

"Don't you?"

"No, I don't believe a word of it!"

"Neither do I!" Old California Joe declared.

"Well, well, if you are not two of the biggest doubting Thomases that I ever ran across!" the Fresh exclaimed, with a grave shake of the head.

"You don't really think that that guileless youth would lie?"

"Lie!" cried the old plainsman. "Consarn his pictur! I don't believe he could tell the truth if he wanted to ever so bad!"

"Oh, no, he wouldn't do such a thing—the old Jew wouldn't attempt to throw me off the track in such a way!" Blake declared. "No, pards; we will go to the corral and get our horses, inquire anxiously if any one has seen the aged Hebrew take the road leading to Chihuahua, and then we will set out to overtake him—"

"Oh, yes; I see your game now!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed. "You will apparently start in pursuit, so as to deceive the old Jew and make him think you believe this yarn about his having left El Paso on a journey."

"Kinder throw the old galoot off his guard," California Joe suggested.

"Yes; and then to-night I will be back in El Paso, and if I don't find a way to get into the Jew's castle, then I am not so smart as I think I am."

"Wa-al, now, it will jest do me good to see you play roots on that 'ar Jew!" the plainsman declared.

"I will try the rifle to-night; I may not be able to make it, but I reckon I will, unless the old man is a mighty sight smarter than I think he is."

"He is in the house, I feel sure of that!" the Fresh continued. "He is not the kind of man to start off on a journey at a moment's warning. And then, if he was going to Chihuahua, he would be sure to take the stage; a man of his years and character would never make the journey on horseback. I feel quite sure that the old fellow would never be able to ride so far."

"Sure as ye'r born!" Old California Joe declared.

"No it is a trick to throw me off the track!" Blake declared. "He fears that an interview with me will not be pleasant, and so has made up his mind not to see me. Of course he is too shrewd not to know that in time I will surely see him, but he reckons that if he can push the interview off I may not be so hot after him; and then there is the chance, too, that these parties who are going for me may succeed in laying me out before I can get a chance at him."

"Like as not the old fellow has calculated just that way," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Oh, didn't I allers tell yer, pards, that he was a p'ison galoot?" Old California Joe exclaimed. "I kin jest tell you what it is, boyees, you kin s'arch all this country through, cl'ar from the Gulf of Mexico up to the big pine woods of the North, and nowh'ar will you find a bigger rascal than this same measley Jew."

"Thar 'ar' good Jews and bad Jews, and when you come to bad Jews, this here old Hadad Solomons is the king-pin, and no mistake."

By this time the three were at the entrance of the lane which led to the corral, and as there were loungers around, the conversation ended.

The pards got their horses, spoke about trying to overtake old Solomons, whom they believed to be on the road to Chihuahua, and then departed.

"Ten to one that the old Jew has put spies on us, so keep your eyes about you, pards, and see if you can spot the men," the Fresh observed to his companions as they rode out of the corral.

The pards rode at a slow canter through the town, and then struck into the road which led to the old Mexican city.

As they passed the last group of houses, Blake's attention was attracted by a peon—as the tame Indians who act as servants to the Mexicans are called.

The man was sitting by the side of the last one of the houses, with his ragged serape drawn over his shoulders, puffing away at one of the home-made cigars so common to his race.

A ragged peon, smoking a cigar by the roadside, is such a common sight in Mexico, that the circumstance would not have excited the American's attention, had not Blake noticed a peculiar gleam in the fellow's eyes as the three rode past.

"There's a spy for a thousand ounces!" Blake exclaimed to his companions, when they were well out of ear-shot of the man.

"Yes, I noticed that he regarded us intently as we rode past, Ringwood remarked."

"One of those darnd tame Injuns!" Old California Joe exclaimed. "The meanest critter 'bout that kin be scared up, with the exception of a Digger Injun; they ar' as cunning as foxes and as sneaky as snakes!"

"California, you are pretty far-sighted," Blake observed. "When we get on a piece,

just take a look back and see what the fellow is up to. Manage, if you can, so the peon will not be able to detect that you are taking a look at him."

"All right, I kin do the trick slick as kin be, by jest bending for'd, as if I were a-fixing my saddle, and so git a squint at him under my arm," the old scout replied.

Soon he performed the maneuver, and then, when he assumed an upright position again, announced:

"The galoot is a spy, sure enuff! He is on his feet now, watching us."

"Well, that is all right," the Fresh responded. "He will carry the intelligence to the old Jew that we are on the road to Chihuahua, which is exactly what I want him to do."

"How far do you calculate to ride?"

"Only to the first cross-road, 'ben we will turn off," Blake replied. "There is a ranch about half a mile down the road where we can get something to eat, and remain quiet until nightfall; then we will return to El Paso, and on the outskirts of the town—which, by the way, we will approach from the open country for fear that the old Jew may have spies on the different roads. Well, as I was saying, on the edge of the town we will dismount and leave our horses in charge of California, while you and I, Dave, go to interview the Jew. I have thought of a scheme which I think will gain us admission to the house."

This plan was carried out without any trouble, and at eight o'clock in the evening, Jackson Blake and Dave Ringwood were again in the streets of El Paso.

They avoided the main thoroughfares, particularly the Plaza, and kept in the by-streets.

"I want to run across a smart, lower-class Mexican," Blake explained. "One of the kind that hang around the Mexican gambling-houses."

The wish of the Fresh was soon granted, and luckily the man was one with whom the Fresh was slightly acquainted.

The fellow was called Sancho Peralt and bore the reputation of being one of the most unlucky gamesters in the town. Mexican Mike's shebang was his headquarters.

The man was slouching along with his head drooped upon his breast, and the moment Blake caught sight of him he exclaimed to his companion:

"Here is the very man I want, and from his appearance I would be willing to bet a fortune that he has just been cleaned out in some of the Mexican dives. If so, I can undoubtedly drive a bargain with him."

The man came up and Blake accosted him.

The speculations of the Fresh were true; the fellow had just lost his last coin in Mexican Mike's place, and so he readily agreed to perform the service which Blake required for ten silver ounces.

Then, too, the man had a grudge against the old pawnbroker, for on several occasions the Jew had driven a hard bargain with him.

The plan being all arranged, the three set out, the Mexican going on ahead and the Americans following about a hundred feet behind.

When they came to the Jew's abode, the Mexican went to the door and the Americans stole along the shadow of the wall and concealed themselves behind the corner of the house about a yard from the door.

The Mexican knocked gently, like a man who was not desirous of attracting attention, and soon the panel opened, the face of the Jewish youth appearing.

"Who is it?" he inquired.

"Sancho Peralt, and I have a valuable diamond ring which I want to raise a loan upon; see, it is a sparkler," and the Mexican flashed the light of the ring in the boy's eyes.

"You have been lucky, eh?" exclaimed the youth, with a shrewd chuckle.

"Oh, yes, but I would rather have money than the ring, and I am willing to give a good bargain on it," the Mexican remarked. "I can feel that I am in luck to-night, and, if I have a little money to back me, I am sure I can break the bank at Mexican Mike's."

"Well, I don't know whether you can get any money or not, but I will see," and then the youth closed the panel.

"The old fellow is cautious, but I think the bait is so attractive that he will not be able to resist the temptation to bite," Blake whispered to his companions.

Dave Ringwood nodded, for he thought so, too.

Soon the panel reopened, and this time it was the face of the old Jew that appeared.

"Is dot you, mine goot Mister Peralt?"

"Yes," replied the Mexican.

"Are you all alone, mine goot fr'en?" and old Hadad Solomons peered anxiously up and down the street as he put the question.

"Oh, yes; I have a little bit of business to transact which I do not want to make public."

"Mine boy said it vas about a diamond."

"Yes, see!" and the Mexican displayed the ring.

"Ah, yesh, I will let you in, for I am always glad to oblige a fr'en."

The Jew closed the panel—there was the sound

of moving bolts and bars, and then the door opened.

The trick had succeeded.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

OLD SOLOMONS WEAKENS.

THE amazement of the Jew can better be imagined than described when he opened the door and the Fresh of 'Frisco, closely followed by Dave Ringwood, appeared on the threshold.

The Mexican had disappeared.

The Jew gave a cry of alarm and made a movement to shut the door, but the Fresh was over the threshold, and it was not possible to accomplish the feat without ejecting him, and the pawnbroker knew he was not equal to the task.

"Come! take it easy! no nonsense now! You have no cause to be alarmed!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"I do not want to see you!" cried the old Jew.

"No, but I want to see you, and I intend to do it too!" the Fresh rejoined.

"I will not see you—I will call for der police."

"Solomons, if you utter a yelp I will lay you out fit for planting!" Blake threatened.

The Jew cowered under the threat.

"Oh, mine gootness! do not be violent—dot vill be bad!" the old man protested.

"Usher us into your sanctum then, so we can have a nice quiet talk together."

"But I have nothing to say to you!"

"Yes, but I have got a heap to say to you!" the Fresh retorted. "Come! trot along, and don't make me ugly, because if you do, it will be the worse for you!"

"All right, my tear fr'en', I vill do anything for the sake of peace."

And then, with a heavy sigh, the Jew closed the door, adjusted the fastenings, and then led the way into the large room where he usually received his visitors.

A candle burning on the counter, behind which the Jew generally took his stand, shed a dim light over the room.

There were some chairs scattered about the apartment; Blake helped himself to one, Dave Ringwood sat in another, but the Jew stood in the center of the room, softly rubbing his hands together, evidently in a state of great agitation.

"Now, right at the beginning I want to set your mind at rest," the Fresh of 'Frisco remarked. "You are all right—not in the least bit of danger so long as you are agreeable, and don't try to play any ugly trick upon me."

"Ah, my tear fr'en', I would not do dot for the world!" the pawnbroker protested.

"Well, it would not be wise for you to do so, for, most undoubtedly, you would get hurt," Blake observed, significantly. "Now, sit down and make yourself comfortable."

The Jew sunk into a chair, but he was evidently anything but comfortable.

"To begin, let me tell you, as a friend, that you acted unwisely in going into this game against me," the Fresh remarked.

"Oh, my tear sir, let me assure you—"

"Assure nothing!" exclaimed Blake, abruptly cutting the Jew short.

"Don't try to bumble me about this matter, for the thing can't be done," he continued, sternly. "I know how the trick was worked just as well as though I had planned it myself!"

"You were employed by some one to lure me to El Paso so that this big cowboy would be able to get a chance to attack me."

"Oh, Mister Blake—"

"Shut up now! keep quiet! It will not do you any good to deny it for I know that it is so. Whether there is a man with cattle to sell, or not, it doesn't matter—"

"Oh, I assure you, upon my word of honor—as I am a living mans, it is no lie!" the Jew protested.

"Well, as I said, it matters not. You knew very well when you sent for me that I would not buy the cattle—you know I wouldn't touch any stolen cows if I could buy them for a dollar a head, for I do not do business in that way. I do not care to be mixed up in any crooked work."

"Now then I want to know who put up the job? I think I know the parties. I fancy it is the same ones that set the Frenchman after me, but I want to be sure."

"Oh, Mister Blake, if you will only believe me when I say—"

"Yes, but I don't and I don't want to hear you say anything except to disclose the names of the men who put up this job on me!" the Fresh replied, shortly.

"Just think the matter over, now," Blake continued. "Can't you do better by making a clean breast of it, than by keeping the matter a secret? I don't want to bring you into the affair at all, you know. If you will tell me what I want to know, I will keep the matter quiet; I will not betray to any one that you have revealed the secret to me, but if you are obstinate, then it will be war to the knife between us, and if I don't find a way to get square with you before you are a month older, then my name is not Jackson Blake!"

Again the Jew trembled, for the threat set all his nerves ajar.

Of the many men that he had ever met during

his long experience on the border he esteemed the Fresh of 'Frisco to be the most dangerous of them all.

And so it did not take him long to come to a conclusion, but, with the craft of his race, he endeavored to make an honest penny out of the matter.

"My tear fr'en', if I tells you vat you wants to know, vat vill you gifes me?" he inquired, in his soft, insinuating way.

Blake burst into a laugh, while Dave Ringwood indulged in a low whistle, by which he intended to show his profound amazement at the impudence of the Jew.

"Oh, no, ancient of the tribe of Abraham! you cannot play any racket of that kind on me!" the Fresh declared.

"If there is going to be any money in this transaction it will be from you to me, to keep me from seeking the vengeance which a man such as I am naturally desires when he discovers a satellite of his foes!"

By the words and tone the apprehensions of the Jew were again excited, and he made haste to apologize.

"Yesh, yesh, you are right; I ought not to ask monish!" he exclaimed. "Dot ish all right; I tells you for nothing. I vas hired to get you to come to El Paso."

"And who arranged the trick?"

"You know these two strangers—the Cubans?"

"Yes."

"It was those two."

That is exactly what I thought!" the Fresh exclaimed. "They set the Frenchman on me, and now, Hadad, my boy, can you tell me why they are after me?"

The old Jew's face assumed a blank expression and he shook his head, slowly.

"I cannot," he replied, "nor did I know why they wanted you to come to El Paso. They only paid me to get you here. I thought it was for some fake until dot big cowboy went for you."

"I see." Blake did not place much credit in this statement, but as it mattered little to him whether it was true or false, he allowed it to pass unchallenged.

"Who are these Cubans and what are they doing here?" Blake asked.

The old Jew shook his head.

"Have you any idea why they have a grudge against me?"

"Mine gootness, no!" Solomons exclaimed.

"How should I know?"

"Let me see," observed the Fresh, reflectively. "There is a reason for all things, of course, and these men are not attacking me without good cause. Was it not in Cuba that Manuel and Isabel Escobedo sought refuge when I made this country too hot to hold them?"

Despite the wonderful self-control that the old Jew had, over his features he could not prevent a peculiar expression from appearing in his eyes.

"Yesh, oh yesh," he said, after a moment's pause, as though he had been obliged to ransack his memory in regard to the question. "I believe it was to der island of Cuba dot they went—but they are dead, you know."

"So I heard, and I suppose it was these Cubans who brought the report," the Fresh remarked, carelessly.

The Jew fell into the trap.

"Yesh, yesh, I believe it was."

"Aha! I see the game then!" Blake exclaimed with such a sudden change in his manner that old Solomons was startled.

"Game—mine gootness, mine frien', what game do you see?"

"Why, that report is a lie—a lie gotten up on purpose to deceive me and throw me off my guard!" the Fresh replied. "The Escobedos are not dead—or one of them at any rate is living; these Cubans are Escobedo agents, and that accounts for the attempts to damage me."

"Maybe so," the old Jew exclaimed with an extremely wise shake of the head. "It is a very strange affair, so helps me gracious!"

"Well, I am through with you now," and the Fresh rose to his feet, Dave Ringwood following his example.

The Jew also rose.

"I hope, Mister Blake, dot you will remember your promise and not mix me up mid der af-fairs," he said, cringing.

"Oh, that is all right," the Fresh replied. "I am a man of my word and never betray a confidence. But, Hadad, my venerable tulip, let me give you a bit of advice. Don't try this sort of thing on again—don't go into any scheme against me, for, as a rule, I am not of a forgiving nature, and when I discover that a man is giving aid and comfort to my enemies I usually try to make it warm for him."

"Ah, my tear fr'en', there ish an old saying, once caught, twice shy!" the Jew replied. "I have a fool make of myself this time, but I will not try it on again, so help me, Moses!"

"If you act that way it will show that your head is level!" the Fresh exclaimed, and then, with Ringwood, departed.

When they were in the street, progressing toward the plaza, Dave Ringwood put the question:

"What is the next move?"

"To call these Cubans to an account!" the Fresh replied. "I am going to hunt them up and put the screws on them in a way they will not like."

"Suppose they will not fight?"

"They will have to, or else come down and make a full confession. I mean business, and they will find that I do the moment I get hold of them."

But the Fresh of 'Frisco was not destined to "get hold" of either of the Cubans.

They had settled their bill at the hotel, departed, and the closest search failed to discover a clew to their whereabouts.

The Fresh of 'Frisco was completely baffled.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

For fully a week Jackson Blake and his pards kept up the search for the Cubans, for the Fresh could not get rid of the idea that they were in the neighborhood somewhere.

No trace of them was discovered, though, and the search was at last given up.

The Fresh was annoyed by his want of success.

"I do not admire this at all," he remarked, in confidence to Dave Ringwood, in whose judgment he had great faith. "From the fact that we are not able to get on their trail I am inclined to think they are hiding right in El Paso, and if that is so, just as soon as they think I am off my guard, they will be hatching some new scheme."

"Yes, that seems probable, and the only way for you to beat the game is to be on the watch until you are satisfied that the Cubans are not in this part of the country," Dave Ringwood replied.

"Oh, you can rest assured that I will not be caught napping," the Fresh declared.

And from that time forth, Blake and all his men were as watchful as though they were intruders in an enemy's country.

A month went by without any discovery being made to show that the Cubans had not given up their designs against the Fresh, and about all the pards had made up their minds that they had heard the last of the pair.

The only two who had not come to this conclusion were the Fresh of 'Frisco and Old California Joe.

"Oh, no, not a bit of it," the wily old plainsman declared. "Them galoots haven't given the thing up! It is the natur' of cusses of their kind to hang on until the last man is strung up."

"They are jest a-laying low—jest waiting for a good chance to give you a lick that will be apt to hurt, you bet!"

The Fresh was also of the opinion that the Cubans would yet be heard from, and so did not relax his precautions.

The fact of his engagement to the heiress of Escobedo was made public, and for a time created considerable talk all along the Rio Grande, and great was the envy the news excited in the breasts of the men who had hoped to win, not only the handsomest, but the richest girl for a hundred square miles around.

The young lawyer, Richard Bullifant, was furious, for he had set his heart on winning the heiress, and if he had been a man of war, undoubtedly he would have challenged the successful suitor to mortal combat.

In his rage he had an idea of doing something of this kind, and he began to practice with a revolver, but, in a short time, he saw that nature never intended him for a crack-shot and that to encounter such a man as the Fresh of 'Frisco upon the battle-field would be the bight of folly, for he would surely be killed.

The superintendent of the Escobedo Ranch, Houma, who, as the reader will remember, was handled so roughly once by Jackson Blake, when the man rashly forced a quarrel upon him, was fully as angry as any man along the Rio Grande.

In secret, the superintendent had cherished hopes of one day winning the heiress of Escobedo.

Like many another dull-witted man he had mistaken the girl's kind politeness for interest, and as she always treated him well, he fancied he had made an impression upon her.

Therefore, when the news of the engagement was made public, Houma's rage knew no bounds.

He hated the Fresh, anyway, for the lesson which Jackson Blake had given him was a severe one.

Many a mighty oath had Houma sworn that he would never rest satisfied until he had secured ample revenge.

And now, to add insult to injury, the Fresh of 'Frisco had won the peerless Margaret and was soon to become his master.

Houma registered a mighty oath that the wedding should never take place, and immediately began to practice with rifle and revolver.

The superintendent was a good shot with both weapons, and after steady practice for a couple of weeks he felt safe in challenging the Fresh.

The young lawyer bore the message. Bullifant, when he found that Houma was so

bitterly incensed against Jackson Blake, did all in his power to urge the superintendent to defy the sharp to mortal combat.

Of course, the young lawyer had no idea that Houma aspired to the hand of the heiress, but thought the superintendent hated Blake because the Fresh had thrashed him.

Bullifant waited upon the sport and made known his errand in the courteous manner usual in such cases.

"Mr. Houma desires satisfaction, eh?" the Fresh remarked, with a quizzical glance at Dave Ringwood who chanced to be present.

"Yes, sir, the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another."

"And is it on account of that little misunderstanding that we had?"

"Yes, sir: of course, you are aware that you handled my friend pretty roughly."

"Well, come to think of it, I reckon that he was not treated as if he was made of glass," the Fresh remarked.

"Egad! when you flung him to the ground I was afraid you had broken every bone in his body!" the lawyer exclaimed.

"Oh, no, a little tumble like that does not amount to anything," Blake observed, carelessly.

"But I say, your man has waited quite a time; how is it that he did not attend to this matter sooner?"

"I—really—I do not know," Bullifant answered, a trifle confused, for he was knowing to the fact that the superintendent had been busily engaged in rifle and pistol practice.

"I have been expecting something of this kind from Houma," the Fresh remarked, in a reflective sort-of-way.

"Oh, have you?" Bullifant asked, not knowing exactly what to say.

"Yes, I have been expecting a challenge ever since I heard that the superintendent was wasting a deal of powder and lead in endeavoring to make himself a dead-shot."

The young lawyer coughed, decidedly confused.

"Well, really, I was not aware—"

"Oh, that is all right! I don't lay it up against him!" Blake exclaimed. "There is nothing like being on the safe side, if a man can only manage to get there."

"You have the choice of weapons, of course, as the challenged party," Bullifant remarked, eager to change the subject.

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"What do you prefer?"

"Bowie-knives!" the sport replied, in his cool way.

The lawyer was aghast at the answer.

"Bowie-knives?" he cried.

"That is what I said."

"But such a weapon is unusual!"

"Exactly, and that is the reason I choose it."

"Such a duel would result in the death of both parties!" Bullifant exclaimed.

"Not a bit of it! I am so expert with a knife that I will engage to carve your friend into mincemeat before he can get a chance to carve me," the Fresh replied.

The lawyer was in a quandary; he did not know what to say, for he felt sure that Houma would stand no chance to win in such a fight.

"You do not seem to be eager to go in on this rifle," Blake observed.

"The weapon is such an unusual one," Bullifant explained. "I am sure Mr. Houma knows nothing whatever about it."

"That is the reason I selected it," the Fresh rejoined. "As he has been practicing with both rifles and revolvers, I presume he has got to be a dead-shot by this time, or else he would not challenge me; but, as I am a dead-shot with a bowie-knife, I will have the deadwood on him."

"I guess we will have to call the thing off, then," the young lawyer remarked. "For there isn't any sense in my letting my man go into a fight when he doesn't stand any show to win."

"Then you object to bowie-knives?"

"Oh, yes; it would be madness for me to agree to such weapons."

"Well, I'll tell you what it is; I hate to balk any man when he is anxious for me to give him satisfaction, so I will say repeating-rifles at five hundred yards, each man at liberty to advance after the word is given, and fire as many shots as he likes."

The distance did not suit Bullifant at all, for three hundred yards was the greatest distance that Houma had tried; but as the Fresh was firm, he was obliged to accept, and consoled himself with the thought that after the word was given, his principal, by advancing, could speedily reduce the distance.

The hour for the duel was fixed at six on the following morning and the location a spot midway between the Fresh's ranch and the Escobedo place by the Rio Grande.

Then, after the arrangements were completed, the lawyer took his departure.

When he made known to Houma the conditions, the superintendent did not like the distance, but set out immediately to practice, so as to get used to it.

"Five hundred yards is a pretty long shot,"

Dave Ringwood remarked, after Bullifant had departed.

"Yes, but I am used to it and the chances are that my opponent is not," the Fresh replied. "You see in view of the fact that I am soon to become a married man, I am beginning to take care of myself and in a picnic of this kind I want as sure a thing as I can get."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SURPRISE.

On the following morning the Fresh and his men were up bright and early.

All of the army were aware that there was going to be a fight, for Blake had not thought it necessary to keep them in the dark in regard to the affair, although they had been cautioned not to allow the servants of the ranch to know anything about it, for, as Blake remarked, there was no need of having any more talk about the affair than was absolutely necessary.

"If he plugs me or I plug him, there will be plenty of chances for chin-music," the Fresh observed.

Breakfast was served at five, and at half-past the party expected to be in the saddle, although fifteen minutes at the outside, would take them to the meeting-place.

All of the men were eager to be present at the fight, and Blake declared:

"Considering that the boys don't have many chances for fun, it seems a shame to ask any of them not to go; yet, on the other hand, I don't want it to look as if I had come with a crowd for the purpose of intimidating the gentleman who has done me the honor to ask me to stand up and be shot at."

"Yes, but is it not likely that he will have a gang of his friends along too?" Dave Ringwood asked. "There are half-a-dozen fellows up the river who are his chums."

"I hardly think he will have them there," the Fresh remarked. "There wasn't anything said about our having any witnesses. But I will tell you how to fix the thing, boys," he continued. "It is a broken, undulating country, with plenty of small timber for cover. Dave and I will start, and you follow about half a mile in the rear, and when you get near the ground, tie your horses in some grove, and scout in on foot, near enough to be able to get a view of the skirmish."

"You will be able to work the trick so that if the superintendent has any friends with him, neither he nor they will have any notion that there is anybody in the neighborhood."

They all thought the idea was a capital one, and Old California Joe, the crafty, long-headed scout remarked:

"I reckon that is about as good a deal as you kin scare up! I have kinder been puzzling the inside of my old figure-head over this hyer matter, and the idee has kinder come to me that mebbe thar is some traps inter this duel."

This announcement interested the others at once, for none of them—not even the Fresh of 'Frisco himself—had thought of such a thing.

"What put that idea into your head?" Blake asked.

"Wa-al, now, you have got me foul!" the old mountain-man declared. "I couldn't answer that question to save my life!"

"The idee is thar, I will swar' to that, but how it got thar is more than I know."

"I s'pose the explanation is that I am a kinder of a suspicious old cuss, anyway, and somehow, the notion came to me that, mebbe, this war a trap to git you out whar a gang could git at yer."

"You are thinking of the Cubans!" Blake observed.

"I reckon my mind is a kinder running on them tanned galoots," the old mountain-man admitted.

"This hyer is what bothers me. Why has the superintendent gone for you all of a sudden?"

"Oh, there are good reasons for that," the Fresh replied. "In the first place, I thrashed him, in the second I know he is a rogue, and he feels perfectly sure that when I take command of the Escobedo Ranch he will get his walking papers. And then the third and strongest reason of all is that he has an idea he could win the heiress, for he has been paying especial attention to the lady for quite a while."

"Is that so?" exclaimed the old mountain-man in wonder.

"Yes, my information came from one of the herdsmen on the place, a smart fellow, with a pair of sharp eyes in his head, and who had sense to detect the game that Houma was trying to play. The man wanted to stand well with me, and so put me on my guard. Now you see the superintendent has reasons enough for wishing to lay me out," the Fresh said, in conclusion.

"Yes, yes, it is as plain as the nose on a man's face," Old California Joe observed.

"Wa-al, it won't do any harm for the boyees to be around handy, and they want to see the skirmish anyway."

The Fresh agreed to this, and the programme was carried out.

Blake and Dave Ringwood started on ahead, and the rest followed some ten minutes after;

dismounting when they came near the battle-ground, tying their horses in a clump of timber, then cautiously approaching the scene of action on foot.

When Blake and Dave Ringwood arrived on the field, they found the others on the ground.

With Houma and the young lawyer was the doctor from El Paso and a friend of his.

The Fresh and Houma exchanged bows, and then withdrew in opposite directions, while the seconds arranged the details.

"There wasn't anything said about a surgeon," Bullifant observed, "but as I knew you would not be likely to get one in this section, I took the liberty of bringing one from El Paso, and this gentleman is one of the doctor's students, and I presume you will not object to his presence?"

"Oh, no, that is all right," Dave Ringwood replied. "Now, suppose we get right to work and pace off the ground—about two hundred and fifty paces will be near enough."

The lawyer assented to this, and the distance was soon measured.

"Now, how about the positions? If you think there is any choice, we will toss a coin to decide the matter," Dave Ringwood remarked.

But as it was a cloudy day, the rising sun being hidden by heavy banks of dark vapor, there really was not the slightest difference between the two ends of the line.

"No, I do not think that is necessary," Bullifant replied. "Let my principal take the position nearest to him and yours can do the same."

"How about the signal for the fight to begin? I suppose the doctor had better give that?" Dave Ringwood suggested.

This was approved by the lawyer, and so it was arranged that the signal was to be a shot from the doctor's revolver, preceded by a warning from him to be ready.

The duelists got into position; the seconds retreated to one side, and the doctor and his friend took their station midway the two points occupied by the fighters—well to one side, of course, so as to be out of the range of fire.

"Now, then, gentlemen, look out for yourselves—prepare!" exclaimed the doctor in a loud voice.

The rifles came up to the shoulders of the duelists and their eyes glanced along the shining tubes of death.

The doctor counted, one, two, three, to himself, and then discharged his revolver in the air.

Like an echo came the report of the Fresh of 'Frisco's rifle.

With a gasp the superintendent dropped his weapon, and as it struck the ground the piece was discharged, the ball whistling harmlessly up toward the clouds.

Houma's right arm hung helplessly by his side.

The doctor and his assistant, also the lawyer, hurried to him.

"A most wonderful shot, if it was not an accident!" the surgeon declared, as he examined the wound.

The ball had entered the right arm at the wrist and shattered the bone of the forearm.

"By Jove!" Bullifant exclaimed, "you have had a lucky escape; that man is evidently a dead shot and could just as well have put his ball through your heart instead of shooting to disable you."

The superintendent was deadly pale. His wound was a severe one, but, as Bullifant had remarked, he felt that he owed his life to the mercy of his antagonist, and the knowledge took from him all desire to brave the power of the Fresh of 'Frisco.

Dave Ringwood approached; Blake had dropped the butt of his rifle upon the ground and stood leaning upon it.

"Are you satisfied—is another shot desired?" Ringwood asked.

"No, I am disabled," Houma replied, before his second could speak. "Tell Mr. Blake I am content, and that I feel I was a fool to attempt to measure strength with him."

Ringwood bowed, expressed the hope that the wound was not a severe one, and as the doctor began to dress the hurt, returned to report to Blake that the affair was ended.

"I didn't want to kill the fellow," Blake remarked as he and his pard mounted their horses, "and I had to give him a lesson."

Away rode the two at a slow canter, and by the time they got a thousand yards away a surprise was sprung upon them.

Out from a clump of timber rode a dozen horsemen, all brandishing revolvers, and they charged directly for the pair.

The red ponchos and masks, the red hair and beards showed that the strangers were the Red Riders of Rayon, the famous brigand band which the Fresh of 'Frisco had once dispersed.

The pards prepared for fight, but before the Red Raiders got within range they were treated to a surprise which they little anticipated.

A volley of revolver shots was poured into them, at point-blank range, from out of a clump of timber, which emptied six saddles, and then, with a yell, Old California Joe and the rest of the Fresh of 'Frisco's men sprung from their hiding-places.

The Red Riders wheeled toward the right, and fled to the river in wild confusion.

The pards chased them, blazing away as they ran.

Three of the riders only gained the opposite bank of the Rio Grande, the rest were carried away by the river, now quite high and turbulent.

The victors gathered the dead and wounded brigands.

The red mask, false hair and beard had fallen from the face of one of the wounded men, and the features of the Cuban, Gomes, were revealed.

"Aha, caught at last in your own trap?" Blake exclaimed. "But why have you, a stranger, attacked me?"

"Do you not know me, you accursed American?" cried the dying man. "I am Manuel Escobedo! You have succeeded in killing me, but my sister, Isabel, who has escaped you, will avenge me!" And then the death-rattle sounded in his throat.

At last Blake comprehended; the two Cubans were the brother and the sister, in male attire.

An eager search was made for the disguised Isabel, but as she could not be found—she was not one of the three who gained the bank, as was afterward discovered—it was concluded she had found a watery grave in the Rio Grande's yellow flood.

Our tale is told; a few more words only.

Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, wedded the peerless Margaret Escobedo, and after the wedding, in obedience to Margaret's wish, the ranch was sold, all the Western property turned into ready cash, and the pair departed to seek a home in the far East, amid the civilization where the heiress of Escobedo had been reared.

And there in their palace-like home, on the noble Hudson's banks, we will leave the happy pair, but at some future time we may again take the pen in hand to relate the adventures which in the "effete East" befell the restless, irrepressible son of the Orient, Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

THE END.

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